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"YOU HAVE MISSED!" CRIED UNCLE HONEST, ANGRILY. "SHOOT AGAIN; AND IF YOU MISS, I'LL SHOOT YOU!"

OR,

Yank Yellowbird versus The Leather Jackets.

BY WM. H. MANNING,
AUTHOR OF "WILD WEST WALT," "KANSAS
KITTEN," "BORDER BULLET," "HOT
HEART," "THE DUKE OF DA-
KOTA," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE BALLOON CASTAWAYS.

DURING his experience in the wild mountain region of Idaho, many strange things had fallen under the observation of Doctor Mark Hartley, but what he saw from the ragged side of Sawtooth Ridge that June day eclipsed them all.

He was standing idle, when something attracted his attention which put all other thoughts out of his mind. A hundred rods away a balloon was rising from the earth, moving aloft with a strong and steady motion.

A balloon in the mountains of Idaho!

Hartley had been born and reared in the East, and when there an air-ship was no novelty, but in a region to which modern improvements had

not yet penetrated, it was something probably never before seen. The doctor was astonished, and he stood watching in ever-increasing curiosity.

He could see only one person in the basket, and could distinguish nothing in regard to him except that he looked slight and boyish. Even that much was soon concealed from his view; the balloon arose rapidly, and, entering a strong current of air, was borne away toward the northwest, going further still from the civilized world.

"It's a very remarkable case," muttered Doctor Mark. "Up this way we see very little except gold-diggers and the things pertaining to their calling, but balloons are not used in mining. It is confounded odd! Now, if it had been a balloon moving horizontally onward, or even making a descent, it would not have been so strange, but to see it rise from here!—well, that beats me! If the aeronaut had been on a long trip, and had landed, he would naturally have gone to the town; and he couldn't have failed to see it. The fellow puzzles me!"

The speaker looked again at the fast-receding air-ship, and then it occurred to him that it would be interesting to find the spot from which it had risen.

The moment this idea occurred to him he set off across the ridge to carry it out.

He was not long in reaching the vicinity from which the sky-navigator must have ascended, but he was not so sure that he could locate the exact place. He began the search diligently, but had gone only a few yards when he came upon an unexpected scene.

He first saw a woman, young and remarkably well dressed for that vicinity, and then he discovered that she was kneeling by the side of a man. The latter, stretched out upon the ground, seemed like a dead man, and the conduct of the girl confirmed the idea that some tragedy had occurred. She was weeping softly, yet with plenty of sorrowful feeling, and was caressing one of the man's nerveless hands.

In a moment the professional side of Doctor Mark's nature came to the surface. If any one was injured, it was his place to attend him.

Quickly he moved forward.

The girl heard the footsteps and looked up hurriedly. She had been startled at first, and the sight of the good-looking young doctor seemed to alarm rather than reassure her. One moment she seemed upon the point of fleeing; the next, she grasped the hand of the unknown man the tighter, and faced Hartley defiantly.

He spoke in his kindest voice:

"Pray be at ease, young lady. I am an honest man and a doctor, and if, as seems the case, you have an injured friend, I shall be glad to help you."

Her thoughts turned quickly to the prostrate man.

"He is dead!" she cried, with a fresh burst of tears.

"I am not so sure of that. Allow me to ascertain."

The doctor knelt by the unknown. One touch of the experienced hand was enough to assure him that life was far from being extinct. The beat of the pulse was far stronger and more regular than Hartley had dared to hope. His inquiring eyes were busy while his finger was on the unknown's wrist, and he saw that the man was young, well-formed and intelligent-looking, but there were bruises on his face and hands, and his injuries might be severe.

"Do not despair," the doctor urged. "Life still exists, and I think there is good ground for hope. Allow me to aid nature in saving him."

From his pocket the speaker took a flask of whisky, and a portion of its contents he poured down the patient's throat, noting the result carefully as he did so.

"I feel sure that we shall save him," he added.

"Oh, if you can, I will pray for you forever!" cried the girl, with a wildness of speech and manner not to be wondered at then.

"I will do my best. But how was he injured?"

"He fell from the balloon."

"Fell from the balloon?" echoed Hartley.

"Or was pushed out," she added, a sudden light appearing in her eyes.

"Is it possible?"

Hartley made the exclamation in wonder and indignation, and then added:

"But how came the balloon here? Where were you going? Who was the other occupant of the balloon, and why did he push this man out?"

Doctor Mark saw the beautiful face of the girl change as he spoke. The startled look reappeared, and she had no reply ready. She hesitated, and then made answer:

"I have no time to answer now. Let us give all our attention to my brother."

"You are right, quite right. Pardon me for wandering from the main issue for a moment, Miss—"

"Orme, sir; my name is Vashti Orme. This is my brother, Joseph."

The explanation was hurriedly made, as though she was anxious to have it over with, but Hartley had given his attention fully to his

patient. He was about to take further steps toward reviving him, but what he saw caused him to exclaim:

"Be of good cheer! Consciousness is returning."

Vashti did not answer, but once more her grasp tightened on Joseph Orme's hand, and her gaze was fixed upon his pale face with inexpressible anxiety and love. Even then Doctor Mark noticed and wondered at it.

The doctor's opinion was speedily verified. The injured man's eyes slowly unclosed and he looked around with every evidence that his mind was clear. Hartley spoke reassuringly.

"Don't be troubled, sir; you are all right."

Was it imagination, or did a look of alarm appear on Joseph Orme's face? Vashti bent and whispered something in his ear. Doctor Mark did not catch the words, but he saw Orme turn his gaze upon the girl with the same appearance of deep affection he had noticed in her just before.

"I don't understand," said the injured man, feebly. "I am hurt, but how? What has happened?"

"You fell," Vashti quickly replied. "Don't you remember? Never mind; don't try. We will talk about it anon."

"Where is Knifebelt?"

"Gone," she answered, looking uneasily at Hartley. "Think only of yourself now. I'll tell you all—"

"But the balloon? Where is that?"

Orme tried to raise himself up as he spoke, but the color suddenly deserted his face, and he fell back, only repressing a groan by a strong effort.

"Pardon me," interrupted the doctor, "but I must insist upon your being careful. The balloon has gone toward the northwest. You are somehow left behind, and you are injured. Such being the case, you must take care of yourself."

"But I don't understand how I came here."

"Joseph," exclaimed Vashti, with increasing uneasiness, "I beg that you will listen to me. Let the matter rest for now, and let me direct you. You know you can trust me."

Hartley saw that there was deep significance of some sort in her words. Plainly, there was some secret she was very anxious to guard, while Joseph's injury had for the time taken away his judgment.

Brother and sister looked at each other, and his manner changed.

"You are right, Vashti," he answered, quickly. "I will do what you say—but my injuries! Great heavens! I trust they are not serious?"

He looked from her to Hartley, and the latter was strongly of the opinion that his anxiety did not spring from the causes which usually influence men at such times.

"I believe they are not dangerous," the doctor replied, "but I have made no professional examination. If you will allow, I will do so at once."

"By all means, do so without delay."

Doctor Mark obeyed. It was no trifling task, for in the fall which he had undeniably had Orme had sustained a general shock which seemed to have affected his whole system. At the end of the investigation Mark was prepared to say that unless there was some internal injury his patient's life was not in danger, but that he would be deprived of his usual activity for some days.

The greater part of his injury had fallen on one hip. There was no fracture, but there was a bruise and discoloration, and when Orme tried to stand it was found to be wholly impossible. The hip had received a severe wrench, and it would be several days before he could walk at all.

Brother and sister exchanged a glance of dismay when this communication was made.

"You had better confide in me, and let me help you," pursued Doctor Mark. "If, as I understand, you were thrown from the balloon by a treacherous companion, I am in favor of taking prompt measures to punish him. He has gone away, but will have to land again soon. Who is he? How did you happen to be here in a balloon? Were you thrown out just as the balloon was rising?—for, of course, you could not have fallen from any considerable distance and survive the shock."

Again brother and sister looked strangely at each other, and it was Vashti who replied:

"We had better speak of this later; just now, I can only think of Joseph."

"Excuse me, but we shall give the man of the balloon—Knifebelt, did you call him?—time to escape."

"No matter."

"As you will; I do not wish to dictate. But what of your plans?"

Hartley was a little annoyed, or he would not have asked the question. Knowing the surrounding country, he saw but one way for the castaways to do.

"I don't know," Vashti helplessly answered.

"Where are we, anyway?"

"Near the town of Hornets' Nest."

"What State?"

"Territory of Idaho."

"Where is this town you mention?"

"Just beyond the point of the ridge. It is only a few minutes' walk for a well man."

"Joseph cannot walk."

"He will have to be carried; I will procure men at the village."

Again brother and sister exchanged a troubled glance.

"What other town is near?" Joseph asked.

"None. It is twenty miles to Snakefoot Pass."

"Is there any cave near?"

"Are you thinking of taking refuge in one?"

"Yes. You see—"

"I object. I am not going to act the doctor to any man who lives in a cave. Care is very necessary in your case. With reasonable conduct of the case I believe you will be all right in a few days, but you must not be exposed to the danger of taking cold. Such a thing might cripple you for life. You need a doctor, and I am the only one near. If I devote myself to you, you must go to Hornets' Nest, where you can command all possible conveniences."

Hartley spoke somewhat sharply, but as his gaze wandered to Vashti's face, his own expression softened.

"Don't think me severe, for I speak for your good," he added. "You have heard the doctor's verdict; now hear that of the friend: Go to Hornets' Nest, and I will do all that I can for you. We lack the means one can command in more highly civilized places, but I can make you comfortable, and shall be glad to do all in my power."

He looked at Vashti as he spoke, thinking how pretty she was, but it was Joseph who made the reply.

"What kind of a place is Hornets' Nest?"

"It is a mining town, in the full sense of the word."

"How large?"

"About one hundred and sixty persons, all told."

"Is there a telegraph office there?"

"Bless you, no! We don't aspire to that yet. A tri-weekly stage to Snakefoot Pass is all of which we can yet boast. We are shut in by these mountains from all the rest of the world."

Joseph's question had seemed to indicate that he wished to send a telegram, but the answer caused a look of great relief to appear on his face which Doctor Mark did not fail to see. Plainly, Orme was glad to hear that Hornets' Nest had so little communication with the outside world.

"We will go," the injured man promptly decided. "I dare say you can arrange it so that Vashti can care for me? No one will lose financially by us; we have the money to pay all bills."

"Even if you had not, we are not inhuman. Yes, I can place you to your satisfaction. An old man and his wife, Graham by name, will take you into their house at my request; and their daughter, Peggy, will be a friend and companion to Miss Orme. And now I will hasten to the village, rally four strong men and have you carried there at once. Rest easy; you shall be made comfortable."

CHAPTER II.

PEGGY BECOMES A HISTORIAN.

DOCTOR MARK made the journey to the village in a very meditative frame of mind, and all his thoughts were of the Ormes. His impressions of them would have been very favorable had it not been for one thing. They were intelligent; their personal appearance was pleasing; Vashti was beautiful and Joseph was manly; but upon all this was cast the shadow of the mystery they had set between themselves and their would-be friend.

They had made no explanations in regard to themselves; they had evaded answering his direct questions; they had spoken of living in a cave in preference to going to the town; and they had been manifestly relieved when they found that Hornets' Nest had but little communication with the outside world.

There was only one way to explain this—they had a secret to conceal.

What this secret was Doctor Mark did not know, but he was free to admit that appearances were against them. Their anxiety to avoid the notice of their fellow-beings could be explained only on one basis, as far as he could see—fear lay at the bottom of it. Well aware that there was many a person in the West actuated by like notions who wished to shun society because he was a fugitive from justice, Hartley would have been mentally blind had he not seen the possibilities in this case.

Yet, despite the evidence, he found it hard to believe that Joseph Orme was a criminal. As for Vashti—

Doctor Mark smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

"Let me not lose my head over a pretty girl," he muttered. "I have seen a good many of them, and know that they are only human. I esteem them—yes, I have even loved some of them in my callow youth, but only to see the fancy pass away. The flame of love will start whenever Cupid strikes a match. I, however,

am now a grave man of medicine. Let me forget that Vashti is fair to look upon."

Reaching the village he went first to a neat little cottage, which was an ornament to Hornets' Nest. It was the residence of Cyrus Graham and his family. When the doctor made known the object of his call, he was promptly informed that they would be glad to give shelter to the castaways, and then he found four men who agreed to bring Orme down from the ridge.

A rough stretcher was soon constructed, and Doctor Mark led the way to his patient. He had half-expected not to find the Ormes, despite Joseph's injuries, but they were still there. Joseph was placed upon the stretcher at the cost of considerable pain to him, and then they made the journey to the village.

Vashti walked beside the stretcher, her gaze resting almost constantly on Joseph's face. Doctor Mark gave her aid at various rough places, but though she thanked him for the assistance, it was plain that her thoughts were all of her brother.

Reaching Graham's, they were met at the door by the family, and a good deal of unselfish kindness was shown by all. Joseph was laid upon a comfortable bed, and then the doctor asked all to retire while he made a thorough examination of his patient.

Up to this time Vashti had given her new acquaintances but casual notice, but when all had retired but the family, her regard became as critical as it had before been indifferent.

For several days, at least, these persons were to be her associates, and she knew better than any one else what reason she had for being critical.

Cyrus Graham was a man of seventy years. He was of medium size, and appeared to have been unusually strong and active at one time, but his age was telling upon him, and he was no longer robust. Particular, indeed, must have been the person who could think him an object of doubt. His face, framed in with abundant white hair and a long, white beard, was the personification of kindness.

His wife, Hannah, was equally attractive. Her round, plump face retained its freshness well, and she seemed a fit mate for her husband.

The third and last of the family was the girl, Peggy. Strictly speaking, Peggy was not a beautiful girl, for her features lacked the delicacy which is generally attached to real beauty; but she was pretty—very pretty. She had a remarkably bright, vivacious face, and every young miner in Hornets' Nest was ready to swear that she was the prettiest girl he knew.

Having given their verdict, perhaps it will be as well to let Peggy herself and her record complete the description, as this story progresses.

"My dear," said Mrs. Graham, kindly addressing Vashti, "I want you to make yourself at home, and tell us of anything we can do for you. This town is new and wild, and our resources are limited, but whatever we can do shall be willingly done."

"Thank you, very much," Vashti answered, "but I know of nothing now except the shelter you have so kindly furnished. Hope my brother will soon be well, and then we shall go on."

"Doctor Mark has not told us how you came to be on the mountain," interrupted Peggy, curiously.

"He does not know."

"So you haven't told your story. I'm really glad of it, for I want to hear the whole account, at first hand and unabridged."

"There is no story to tell."

Vashti answered with brevity which was almost curtness, but Peggy did not yet fully understand.

"But we don't know how you happened to be on the mountain. The doctor merely said that you were there, and that your brother was injured, and that was all he did say."

Mrs. Graham's observation had been keener than Peggy's.

"Don't be in a hurry, child," she said, good-humoredly. "Miss Orme needs rest and quiet now, and she can tell us better by-and-by than now."

"Decidedly," added Mr. Graham. "Don't hurry the matter, Peggy; you are too impetuous."

"Nonsense!" cried Peggy, lightly; "you know I am as slow and demure as a nun."

"I don't know much about nuns, and will not dispute you. And now, you had better take Miss Orme to her room and make her comfortable. And don't talk too much, Peggy."

"As if I could! Everybody knows that I hardly ever say a word, and when I do, my remarks are pearls of wisdom. Come, Miss Orme, I will act as your guide, as suggested. We can show you a room as large and fascinating as a bird's-nest, and it will be all your own."

Nothing of ordinary importance could dampen Peggy's high spirits, and she moved gayly away in advance of Vashti. Peggy had a good heart, and did not intend to do any harm, but she had a generous degree of curiosity and was not inclined to drop a matter when once she had become interested in it.

She was not done with Miss Orme yet.

She ushered that young lady into the room before referred to, and for several minutes talked incessantly and lightly, but her mood suddenly changed.

"Do you know," she said, very gravely, "I am just dying to know how you got on the top of Sawtooth Ridge. This is the only way to get to get there unless one passes through miles and miles of wild, uninhabited country, and how you *did* get there I can't surmise. Won't you tell me? Is there a romance about it?"

Her manner had grown eager, but Vashti did not meet her on the same ground.

"There is no romance in real life," answered Miss Orme, in a harsh voice.

"Why! I think there is lots of it!"

"Real life is a tragedy."

"Part of it is."

"To me, it is all of that kind."

Peggy laid one hand caressingly on Vashti's arm.

"Are you in trouble?" she sympathetically asked. "If so, I am very sorry for you."

"Trouble comes to all of us."

"True—but you haven't explained how you came to be on Sawtooth Ridge."

"No; and you must excuse me if I do not tell. Just now I have objections to doing so. I trust that you will not feel hurt, for I am not to blame."

The last words were almost appealingly spoken, and it was quite enough to win Peggy's sympathy.

"How can I?" she replied, promptly. "Of course I respect your wishes, and I am quite sure you are not to blame. Don't worry about us or our curiosity; our principal desire is to take good care of you and your brother, and help you out of your troubles. You have the best of doctors in Mr. Hartley; he knows everything, and he is just splendid."

"He seems to be kind and gentlemanly," Vashti agreed.

"He is all of that."

"What kind of a place is this town?"

"I haven't a word to say in its favor."

"Don't you like it?"

"No, I don't."

"Why not?"

"Oh! for several reasons. It is an out-of-the-way den, like a pocket in one's dress—though I've always lived in out-of-the-way places, for that matter. But I don't like the people. Hornets' Nest has a history!"

"What is it?"

"Well, you see it used to be a very hard place—so they say—and that's how it got its name, Hornets' Nest. Several desperate men located here and run the town to suit themselves. What suited them suited no one else. They ruled with revolver and knife, and it is said that no man's life was safe for a moment. Anyhow, lots of harmless men were killed in cold blood. Then came Uncle Honest—you've heard of him, haven't you?"

"No."

"Then you have come from a long distance. I thought everybody in Idaho had heard of Uncle Honest, the Peacemaker of Hornets' Nest."

"Is he a very good man?"

Peggy grimaced undisguisedly.

"You pay your money, and you take your choice. It don't cost a cent to have an opinion of Uncle Honest, though it is sometimes a right costly job to express that opinion."

The girls had seated themselves, and Vashti was listening with close attention.

"Please continue your explanation," she urged.

"Do I impress you as a promising historian?"

"You do, indeed," and Vashti smiled in appreciation of Peggy's odd way.

"Good, very good! I always felt sure that I had a mission, if I only could find it. But to resume: The bad men of Hornets' Nest, and their reign, flourished for a season, but both came to an end. One day the citizens found placards up all over the village stating that a certain Eliakim Outerbridge—Horrible name, isn't it?"

"It is peculiar, to say the least."

"I should say so. Eliakim Outerbridge! Don't confuse it with Innerbridge, for a person of that name was sent to jail for horse-stealing, and Uncle Honest is a reformer."

"Well, the placards said that the man with the jaw-breaking name would deliver a lecture that evening, with 'Reform' for his subject, and all were invited. All went, and that, of course, takes in the revolver desperadoes of the town. They went; they saw; and Uncle Honest delivered a flowery lecture on sins and the desirability of getting rid of them."

"When half done he took a recess, and that was where the fun came in. The revolver roughs had heard enough, and they rose up and told the speaker they would give him just ten minutes to get out of town. Mr. Eliakim Outerbridge promptly refused to go, and then the roughs made a rush for him. They never reached him. All at once there was a stir in the crowd; the report of a revolver; the report of other revolvers; and when the trouble quieted down, it was seen that the once-bad men of Hornets' Nest would never do any more harm. I know I shall make you shiver, but every one

of them had been shot down, dead, and by their bodies stood the lecturer and three tall young men who were clad in buckskin jackets.

"All this was before I ever saw Hornets' Nest, but old settlers say that the victory was the quickest on record. The roughs had thought to have everything their own way, as usual, but it seems that the other party was all ready for them."

"Outerbridge introduced the three young men as his sons, and then he went right on with his lecture as though nothing had happened, advising folks to reform. I think he was doubtful of their will to do so, for he and his sons stayed right in town. They have been here for years now, and the old man still delivers 'Reform' lectures. More than that he has made his sons rulers of the village, the oldest being sheriff and the other two his assistants."

"That is who Uncle Honest, as he calls himself, and his tribe are. They hold Hornets' Nest in the hollow of their hand, and it is an iron hand. Woe to the man they get down upon! I suppose it isn't my place to criticise them, for they are general favorites, but I must say I dislike them—and fear them!"

Just then the door opened and Mrs. Graham appeared.

"Miss Orme," she announced, "there is some one down-stairs who wishes to see you. His name is Eliakim Outerbridge!"

CHAPTER III.

UNCLE HONEST.

THE sound of the name spoken by Mrs. Graham marked a coincidence so strong, that Peggy's face assumed an astonished expression, but Vashti was less impressed by the coincidence than the fact stated.

"He wants to see me?" she echoed.

"Yes."

"What can he want of me?"

Mrs. Graham saw that the girl appeared to be seriously troubled, and she hastened to reassure her.

"I think it is only a friendly call; probably he wishes to offer his aid, if any is needed. Mr. Outerbridge is a sort of an officer here, and is interested in everybody."

If Mrs. Graham had spoken plainly, she would have said that she considered his "interest" nothing less than impertinent interference in most cases, but she did not wish to alarm Vashti unnecessarily. She gave Peggy a warning glance, but no discretion could allay Vashti's fears.

She had even forgotten Peggy's unfavorable comments upon "Uncle Honest," for the time, but she knew enough other reasons why she should be alarmed by the news she had heard. She was tempted to refuse to go down, but it occurred to her that such a step might arouse the suspicion she wished to avert.

Summoning all her firmness, she arose.

"Very well; I will go at once!" she answered; and then turned to Peggy and added: "Will you keep me company?"

Peggy strongly disliked Eliakim Outerbridge, but she was a loyal little woman, and she promptly decided to go as a protector to Vashti. She knew the visitor, and Miss Orme did not.

The trio descended, and when Vashti followed Mrs. Graham into the parlor, she was treated to the sight of a remarkable-looking man.

He was seventy years old, tall and bony; and though without any great degree of flesh, erect and muscular. In dress he conformed to the prevailing style at Hornets' Nest in some particulars, and went wide astray from it in others. He wore a big, soft and spreading hat, but from his neck to his knees he was incased in a close-fitting Prince Albert coat. It was old, rusty and threadbare, and it did not become him. Fitting tightly, it showed the sharp bones and the angles of his spare form by far too plainly.

From under the hat straggled coarse, iron-gray hair, and over his breast hung a massive beard of the same color. His face lacked the bronzed hue so common to the men of Hornets' Nest, and was a peculiar red in color. Possibly liquid stronger than water had been the material which the artist, Time, had used to color Eliakim's cuticle.

The face was not a pleasant one. True, the man had a smile which was bland in the extreme, and the smile was seldom invisible; but it was offset by an expression not calculated to make friends for Eliakim. His small eyes, set under heavy brows, looked secret and crafty, and the absence of teeth in his mouth made his long, hooked nose reach well down over his lips. When he talked, that nose moved up and down, keeping time to the movement of his jaws, and in its descent, furnished an irresistible reminder of a hawk diving for prey.

Mr. Outerbridge arose and bowed profoundly.

"Happy to see ye—happy to see ye all, ladies. This is Miss Orme, is it? Just so; thank ye for the introduction, Goodwife Graham. A comely maiden, by my faith! Pray be seated. Young Peggy, you are looking as blooming as a rose. Now don't deny it, for the old man has eyes; I assure you he has eyes, ladies. Pray be seated, all."

He was still standing, bowing and waving his hand toward the various chairs, while the old,

bland smile hovered continually on his face and his long nose dove, hawk-like, down toward his chin.

Not until they were all seated did he assume a similar position. Even then he did not stop talking. Smiling his blandest smile, he took up all the time and gave no one else a chance.

"A fine day, Goodwife Graham; a most lovely day. Ah! little do the dwellers in walled cities know of the climate we have here in the mountains. Look at the cheeks of our fair young Peggy! See the red, red roses there! Ah! Miss Orme, you have come to just the place of all places.

"You know me of course, Miss Orme. Everybody knows me, from the big miner down to the prattling infant. Ah! ah! Yes, yes! And even the birds seem to know me, for as they flit through the underbrush they pipe their notes and seem to say: 'There goes Uncle Honest!' That is what I am called, Miss Orme. I was christened by the good old Biblical name, Eliakim, but men would call me Uncle Honest. I go abroad and hear my fellow-men say: 'There goes Uncle Honest! Honest Eliakim Outerbridge! we can trust him in all things!'

"Such homage is pleasant, I must admit, and perhaps it is not wholly undeserved. I am, thank Providence, an honest man, and I try to do good. I aim to be a reformer, to make my fellow-men better; to purify the morals of all I meet. When I came here this was a rough place—Hornets' Nest, they called it. Ah! ah! It was sad, but I have improved the place. True, it is not perfect even now, for lawless deeds are committed, but I strive to crush out the germs of sin—I and my noble boys.

"Have you heard of my sons, young lady? Isaac, Peter and Aaron are their names—good old Biblical names, they are. And well do they apply to my sons; good boys, they are—yes, yes, good boys!"

Mr. Outerbridge ceased. He was not by any means out of breath, but something—perhaps an innate sense of modesty—kept him from monopolizing all the time. While he had talked his hawk-like nose had been diving for prey, his bland smile had been gently hovering on his face, and he had continually rubbed his big hands together. Now that he was done the hawks remained quiet, as though perching on a limb to rest for another flight, but the smile seemed to be a fixture, and he still caressed his hands.

Vashti had been gazing at the man in wonder and growing aversion. He might be the hero of Hornets' Nest, and highly regarded by all except an envious few, but he did not please her. He had all the appearance of a vagabond, and active connection with soap and water seemed necessary to his outer person; and his over-smiling, over-bland and over-polite manner disgusted her.

When he ceased speaking, nobody seemed to have anything to say; but Mrs. Graham nervously forced a remark which broke the silence.

"Mr. Isaac Outerbridge is Sheriff of Hornets' Nest," she explained.

"Yes, yes!" agreed Uncle Honest. "A good son—a good son; and unanimously elected."

The last statement was a fact, yet only one vote had been cast for Isaac. His father had informed the citizens that Isaac was their sheriff, and sheriff he had been ever since.

"You have had an adventure, young lady," added Uncle Honest, abruptly.

"Yes."

Vashti's voice was low, and her look of trouble increased.

"How did it happen?"

"I am not in mood to tell now."

"Deary me—deary me! Are you so shaken up?"

"Yes."

"It must have been serious."

Vashti did not answer.

"We saw a balloon rise from Sawtooth Ridge," added Uncle Honest. "Did you come in that?"

"I am sorry, Mr. Outerbridge, but I can give you no information."

Mrs. Graham looked startled, but Uncle Honest pursued his inquiries in a calm, bland manner:

"Why can't you?"

"The matter to which you refer," said Vashti, with firmness, "is one which concerns me and my brother alone. Let it suffice that we are here."

"Are you aware that I am practically the Mayor of Hornets' Nest?" gently asked Outerbridge, still smiling.

"So I understand."

"Suppose that I see fit to make my inquiry an official inquiry?"

"What right have you to do that?"

"The right of the mayor."

"I deny it. Neither mayor nor any one else has any right to interfere with the coming or going of honest persons."

Vashti had thrown off her air of fear. The persistence of the man had aroused her courage, and she spoke with firmness and decision which surprised even herself.

"My dear girl," pleasantly replied Uncle

Honest, "I fear you are very deficient in knowledge of law. If you will consult Blackstone you will find that when an officer calls, a citizen must tell all about himself."

"You speak foolishly, sir. An officer has no right whatever to interfere with an honest citizen. If you think that I am ignorant of the first principles of law, you are very much mistaken. I have not lived all my life where law was unknown."

"Then you confess that you are from the East?" the inquisitor quickly returned.

"I confess nothing."

"Really, young lady, I must say that your conduct is open to censure. I came here as your friend, even as I desire to be the friend of all, but your evasion of simple questions raises painful doubts in my mind. People are not usually so close-mouthed unless they have a guilty secret. This fact is undeniable. Now, far be it from me to do injustice to any one, but the good of Hornets' Nest is my first consideration. I am here as a peacemaker, a protector, and a guardian of public morals; I should be false to my trust if I failed to take notice when a dangerous element appears. That is all that I have to say now, and I am deeply pained to say even that much."

Mr. Outerbridge had risen with the evident intention of taking his departure. His manner had not changed. His politeness, his smile, and his genial, mild voice, remained the same, but he had thrown Mrs. Graham into a panic.

"I am sure, sir," she protested, with considerable agitation, "that Miss Orme does not wish to give offense in any way, or—"

"Not in the least," agreed Eliakim, with a benevolent wave of his hand.

"She—she means well," added Mrs. Graham, very awkwardly.

"That is very evident."

Uncle Honest was ready to agree to anything, it seemed, and that was just what troubled Mrs. Graham most. She tried desperately to think of something to say which would appease the old man, but the effort was a failure. Nothing but diplomacy would be of any avail at that moment, and all her diplomacy had gone under the blighting effect of alarm.

Mr. Outerbridge bowed himself out very benignly and pleasantly, and was soon seen walking away up the street.

Silence reigned in the room he had just left, and it was the silence of dismay, too. Vashti, looking at her companions, could not but see that they were frightened—Mrs. Graham betrayed the fact the most, her face being very pale—and all of Vashti's fears returned.

"Have I made an enemy?" she faltered.

"Heaven help you!" answered Mrs. Graham, in three words.

"I don't see why he should care."

"That shows that you don't know the old rascal," retorted Peggy. "He cares for everything that don't concern him, and what is more, he makes his objection felt."

The door opened and Doctor Mark appeared.

CHAPTER IV.

IMPENDING DANGER.

PEGGY hailed the new-comer rapturously.

"Just the man of all men that we want to see," she declared, volubly, trying to arouse Vashti from the mood of alarm which was upon her. "Doctor Mark, we want to take you to our hearts and our confidence."

"I am at your service," he replied, readily, though his manner showed that he was in a mood too serious to take notice of her jest.

"First tell me of my brother," interrupted Vashti, quickly.

"I am happy to say, Miss Orme, that I can see no reason why you need to be worried. He has sustained a severe shock from his fall from—wherever he fell—and the results might easily be aggravated to something serious; but he has only to keep his bed, use care, receive good nursing, and in a short time he will be comparatively well."

"In how long a time?"

"He may be able to get outside the house at the end of a week."

"Not sooner?"

"Decidedly not."

"I am very sorry."

"So am I, but our human wishes avail but little when they run contrary to the decrees of Providence."

Hartley spoke with some severity, for he was beginning to feel himself an injured man. Vashti and her brother wished him to accomplish impossibilities, but were not willing even to place confidence in him in return.

"Miss Orme has quarreled with Eliakim Outerbridge," announced Peggy, abruptly.

Doctor Mark turned suddenly upon the speaker.

"What's that?" he demanded.

Peggy repeated her assertion, and Vashti saw that the doctor's face had grown very grave, but Mrs. Graham interposed.

"There has been no quarrel," she explained, "but Miss Orme refused to give any information."

"Then Outerbridge has really been here?"

"Yes."

"To question you?"

Hartley had turned toward Vashti.

"I suppose so; in any case, he did question me," she answered.

"And you refused to give any information?"

"Yes."

There was a brief pause, and Vashti grew doubly alarmed as she saw that Doctor Mark appeared almost as much troubled as Mrs. Graham.

"What have I done?" the girl demanded. "What sort of a man is this Eliakim Outerbridge who, acting as the chief officer of law here, is so much to be feared simply because I do not see fit to tell him all my private affairs?"

"He is absolute monarch of Hornets' Nest," Peggy responded, "and he makes the biggest kind of a circus for those who don't obey his every look and word."

"Don't put it too strongly, Peggy," cautioned the doctor. "As our young friend has said, Miss Orme, Eliakim Outerbridge rules here absolutely. He has taken it upon himself to do so, and nobody thus far has denied his assumed right. I will say frankly that he is not a favorite with any of us here present, but he is a great favorite with nearly all our other citizens."

"Blind dolts!" muttered Peggy.

"He is regarded as an incorruptibly honest man," pursued Hartley. "His adherents admit that he is a trifle too severe, and too much like the religious fanatics of past centuries, but they ascribe it to zeal. He announces that it is his desire to keep all manner of evil out of Hornets' Nest, and in the discharge of his duty he has no mercy on criminals."

"I do not see why I should fear such a man," said Vashti.

"I trust all will be well."

"That does not explain, Mr. Hartley. All of you are alarmed because I have refused to confide my secrets to Outerbridge. What need is there of this if he is so worthy a man? Come, you are not frank with me. Let me know the whole truth!"

"You shall," the doctor gravely replied. "There is usually a second side to every case; there is one now. While four-fifths of the people of this town worship Uncle Honest, as he is called, there is a small party that holds a different opinion. This party asserts that Outerbridge is not what he seems; that he is not honest, nor a reformer, nor a safe man to have around; and it is believed that he runs Hornets' Nest only for his own good and gain. They regard him as a dangerous humbug. As official and 'peacemaker' he has done many a relentless act here. Families have been deprived of their property; others have been exiled; and there have been darker deeds which I need not tell. All this, Uncle Honest says, has been done in the name of law, but there are those who say it was done in outrageous persecution."

The doctor spoke plainly. He knew that if he aided the Ormes after Eliakim Outerbridge had publicly pronounced against them he would do so at peril of his own life, and he could not afford to take all this risk without letting Vashti see plainly the gulf to which they were drifting.

She had grown pale, but her mind remained clear.

"But why should he attack me?" she asked.

"He is suspicious. He sees in every new-comer some one who may shake his power here, and makes haste to bind that person to his cause—or get rid of him!"

"Is this really a rough place?" asked Vashti, tremulously.

Had she spoken the thought that was in her mind she would have asked if the place was so rough that Outerbridge would dare to do her and Joseph physical harm, but she dared not utter the words.

"The career of Hornets' Nest would not make a pleasant page in history," Hartley answered.

He was silent for a moment, and then he added:

"I am going to Outerbridge."

"Why?" Mrs. Graham asked.

"To pacify him, if I can. Something must be done to quiet the man or—well, you know his way. Miss Orme, have you any statement which you wish made to him?"

"Yes; please tell him that I did not intend to offend him in any way."

"Child," interrupted Mrs. Graham, aroused from her usual placid mood by fears which pointed to dangers which would menace her family as well as the new-comers, "can't you see that Eliakim Outerbridge will not accept the shadow for the substance? He has asked for your story, and nothing else will satisfy him. This is very plain."

Vashti placed her hand over her heart, as though there was some sharp pain there, and glanced at Doctor Mark, but his gaze was averted. His gloomy expression made sufficient answer.

"What can I say?—what can I do?" the girl exclaimed. "I have stated that I have no story to tell, and I say so now. That man has no right

to my private affairs, and I cannot reveal them to him."

"Then let us say no more about it."

Hartley spoke quietly and, rising, moved toward the door.

"Doctor Mark, will you wait outside one minute?" quickly asked Peggy.

"Just one minute."

The doctor nodded and went away, and then Peggy swooped down upon Vashti.

"You may as well know the whole truth," she said, in her straightforward way. "We are all afraid of that miserable old man. He allows no one to dispute his sway here. If any one tries it, that person comes to grief right away. The very lightest calamity he can expect is to be driven away, and he is lucky if he is not suspended from the limb of a tree."

"Why are such atrocities allowed?" Vashti interrupted, shivering.

"Because nine-tenths of Hornets' Nest worships Outerbridge; because he is generally regarded as a man of unswerving honor and uprightness; because the people worship him. He is their 'peacemaker,' their ruler, their just judge and their idol. It is only a small faction like us who can see clearly. When he visits wrath and ruin upon any one he always says that he discovers them to be criminals, and there it rests; but we believe that he is the biggest rascal of the lot, who will hesitate at no crime."

"Why did fate drive me here?" muttered Vashti.

"You may well ask the question, for your life will be in danger as long as you oppose Uncle Honest."

"I will go away as soon as Joseph is better."

"Do you think those men will wait for him to recover?" impatiently asked Peggy.

"What can I do?" Vashti demanded, in despair.

"Tell your story—some story—any story—to Eliakim Outerbridge. It is not likely that he will investigate it, and if you are afraid—that is, unwilling to tell the truth, make the story fictitious. Anyhow, tell something and pacify him."

Vashti was strongly urged, but, unfortunately for herself and many others, she chose to temporize.

"I will make no decision to-day, but, to-morrow, something shall be done."

"Delay may be fatal."

"Do not worry me any more!" cried the girl, almost wildly.

Peggy turned away. Mrs. Graham sighed. Peggy went to the door and spoke to Hartley.

"You can go," she simply said.

He glanced at her, read failure in her face, and then walked silently away down the street. He went at once to the office which Outerbridge shared with his sons. The building was dignified with the title of "City Hall," and was an office, court-room and jail under one roof.

When Hartley entered Uncle Honest was not present, but the sons were. These men were magnificent in their show of physical strength. None of them varied an inch from being six feet in height, and all had immensely broad shoulders, long, large arms, powerful limbs and a general physical formation which barbarian warriors might have envied fifteen centuries before. So might the men have looked whom Alaric, the Visigoth, led to the gates of Rome.

The Outerbridge brothers differed but little except in their way of dealing with their beards. Isaac, the eldest, shaved closely, but the black beard always showed a dark line around his jaws, even when fresh from the razor. Aaron wore a full beard, but it was not allowed to grow over an inch in length. It was jet-black. Peter, the youngest, had a smooth face. Unlike his brothers, his beard did not grow thickly, and his face looked boyish, plump, and far less severe than those of his companions.

All were clad in buckskin coats—the same which had given them their name, "The Leather-Jacket League."

Doctor Mark entered with an assumption of ease he was far from feeling, and greeted each one pleasantly. Isaac and Aaron had a ponderous way of speaking, and it was now shown as usual.

Nothing in their manner indicated anything out of the common current of affairs.

"Uncle Honest is not here, I see," continued Mark, giving Eliakim the title he liked best.

"No," Isaac replied.

"Has he been here lately?"

"He left not two minutes ago," the Leather-Jacket composedly returned.

CHAPTER V.

THE SKY NAVIGATOR.

THIS information convinced Doctor Mark that the brothers had heard the report, and he was rather glad that Uncle Honest was not present. There was no such thing as dealing with Eliakim and getting the truth, for the old man would maintain his bland manner and lie unconscionably if he saw fit, while Isaac was usually blunt in his manner.

"I presume," continued Hartley, "that he has told you about the Ormes?"

"He has," Isaac agreed.

"And his visit there?"

"Yes."

"May I ask his opinion?"

"He said but little."

Hartley found himself met discouragingly.

"I am afraid," he resumed, trying to assume a jesting air, "that those women acted foolishly."

"Women generally do act foolish," Isaac tersely replied.

"When Joseph Orme gets better he will make it all right."

The doctor kept up his careless air, but studied Isaac's face closely. He saw the young man's severe lips close in a way he did not like, but there was no response. Hartley went on with growing uneasiness:

"The brother and sister are in sore trouble, it seems, and, between you and me, scarcely in good mental condition."

"Don't trouble yourself to defend them," curtly directed the Leather-Jacket leader. "It is a trifling matter."

"What do you think of them?"

"Nothing. My thoughts are given to more important matters than that."

Isaac seemed coldly sincere, but Hartley had no faith in what he said; he knew too well the way of the rulers of Hornets' Nest.

"They will not long be with us," Doctor Mark resumed. "They aspire to go somewhere—I don't know where—and will move on as soon as Orme's injuries will admit, and I shall have him out of his bed in a few days."

Isaac drummed thoughtfully upon the table for a moment, and then unbent a trifle.

"You saw the balloon, Hartley?"

"Yes."

"What did you make of it?"

"It seemed to be an ordinary balloon, as far as I could see. My first sight of it was when it ascended. It then drifted away toward the northwest and soon disappeared."

"A peculiar way to travel."

"For this region, yes."

"Who was in it?"

"I could see only one person."

"What was he like?"

"I could tell only imperfectly at such a distance, but he seemed to be a slender boy."

"Might it not have been a tall man?"

"I am sure his face was beardless."

"Did he wear a cape-coat?"

"I can't say as to that; I noticed nothing of the sort."

"Yet he may have been a tall man in a cape-coat, eh?" persisted Isaac, much to Mark's surprise.

"Such a thing might have been," Hartley admitted, "but it is my opinion that it was a mere youth."

"What do you think was the object in landing on Sawtooth Ridge?"

"Probably it was only chance; I can see no object whatever; and you must remember that a balloon is not an easily-guided craft. It would be rare good luck, I should say, which would enable any spy-traveler to bring a balloon safely down on the Ridge. Even if he could make the descent, the roughness of the place would show him that he would probably get the inflated part of his air-ship torn to pieces upon the rocks and trees."

"It was not torn, though."

"No."

"I believe the landing was made on purpose."

"With what object?"

"That I don't know."

"I think you are wrong. I know nothing about it, but it is dollars to cents that the balloon, drifting toward the northwest, made the descent by chance, and that the boy then seized the opportunity to desert his companions and make off alone."

"Why should he?"

"I haven't the least idea."

Isaac had displayed considerable curiosity while pursuing this inquiry, but, when convinced that he could gain no information, he relapsed into his old, indifferent mood. It was clear to Mark that the Leather-Jacket had some well-defined suspicion in his mind. His mention of the man in the cape-coat revealed this fact, and added to the mystery of the case. It also suggested new dangers for the Ormes, for the Outerbridge tribe seemed to have connected them, rightfully or wrongfully, with some particular party.

Hartley remained at the "City Hall" some time longer. He did not see how he could do any good by urging the case of the Ormes, but he was anxious to maintain good will with the Leather-Jackets. As he looked at the trio of young giants he could hardly avoid a shiver.

Unless he was greatly mistaken there was a good deal of innocent blood upon their hands.

It was true that all Hornets' Nest, with a few exceptions, bowed the knee to the "reform" party, and that the brothers represented respectively the sheriff and his two assistants, but Hartley regarded the people of Hornets' Nest as blind fanatics.

They might worship Uncle Honest and his sons, but nothing could change Mark's opinion.

Personally he had no fear of the young giants. Fear and he were strangers, and as far as he was personally concerned he felt able

to care for himself, but the fatal helplessness of wounded Joseph Orme and his sister was quite another matter. For their sake he tried to impress Isaac favorably and soften his hard heart. How he succeeded he could not tell; Isaac was never anything but severe, stern and stoical, and probably never would he while there was sin in the world for the gladiatorial Leather-Jackets to crush out.

When Doctor Mark left the office night hovered dark and gloomy over Hornets' Nest. Overhead the clouds hung like an ebon veil, presaging rain, and locomotion in the village was not rendered any easier because a bright gleam of lightning now and then flashed through the forbidding gloom.

Hartley was moving along in this darkness when, as lightning flashed out once more, a man suddenly appeared in his path.

The doctor's hand fell to his ready revolver. There were occasional deeds of violence in Hornets' Nest which were supposed to be done by mere cut-throats, and he had no disposition to become the victim of one of these desperadoes.

The other man spoke quickly, however.

"Pardon me, friend," he said, "but can I speak with you?"

His voice and manner were pacific enough, but Mark was still suspicious.

"I don't recognize you," he replied.

"I am a stranger to you, but—"

"You have a name, I suppose?"

"Yes, and I will soon tell it to you; but just now I wish—"

"There is no time like the present. I don't particularly aspire to waltz around in this darkness with a man who won't tell his name—"

The lightning flashed out once more, and the stranger was momentarily revealed to Mark's gaze. The latter could not avoid a start. He saw a tall, slender man who wore a cape-coat, and Isaac Outerbridge's words flashed upon him. He felt sure that he did not know the man, yet there he was in the village, while Isaac had intimated that he was the balloon-pilot who had come from some unknown place.

"Excuse me," quickly responded the stranger, "but I am very willing to tell my name. I only ask that I need not pause here to do it. You are, I think, Doctor Mark Hartley?"

"I am."

"Is your home near?"

"Yes."

"Will you let me accompany you there?"

"Come!"

Hartley was no longer reluctant. If Isaac was interested in the man with the cape-coat, so was he; if Isaac inferred that the man was connected with the mystery of the balloon, then, certainly, no chance must be passed by to know who and what he was.

Straight toward the doctor's little house went the couple. They entered; they went to the office. Hartley made a light, and as the darkness receded, the two were revealed to each other's gaze.

Doctor Mark, at least, looked with interest.

He saw a man about fifty years of age, tall, slender and spare of flesh, with hair which had once been very black, but which was now abundantly and curiously mixed with gray. His face, which was deeply bronzed, was long and narrow, but not emaciated, and a pair of black eyes gleamed brightly and intelligently under long brows. His garments were plain, but good, the cape-coat being the most noticeable feature.

"Well, sir, I am at your service," said the doctor, after a pause.

"I wish to speak of one of your patients."

"Indeed!"

"Yes; the stranger whom you found in the hills."

Hartley leaned back in his chair and looked fixedly at his visitor. Isaac had known what he was talking about when he referred to the man in the cape-coat, but the doctor himself did not have any light whatever on the point.

"To whom?" he asked.

"Joseph Orme."

"Are you his friend?"

"Yes."

"Not the balloonist?"

"I am not the scoundrel who ran away from the Ormes with the balloon, yet I know something about air-ships. In fact, I have navigated the sky a good deal, and among the Indians I have been given the sobriquet of 'Storm Rider.'"

"And your real name is what?"

"I have not heard the sound of it for twenty years. I am the friend of the Ormes, yet they have no idea what name I bore in my old, happier days. They know me only as Storm Rider, the Sky Navigator; the world knows me only by that title; so let me ask you to be content with it."

"As you will."

Doctor Mark answered readily, for the stranger's manner was pleasant and agreeable.

"Now as to the Ormes," Storm Rider pursued; "they must leave here at once."

"Leave here?"

"Yes."

"Impossible!"

"But I say they must."

"Why, man, it would be the death of Joseph, or, at least, it might cripple him for life. He is badly shaken up, the bulk of the injury being in one hip. A few days of rest will make that all right, but to move him now would be to endanger his whole future."

"That is bad," the stranger firmly replied, "but the risk must be taken. He need not be carried far, but he must be got away from this village!"

CHAPTER VI.

PERPLEXITIES INCREASE.

DOCTOR MARK thrust his hands into his pockets and looked at Storm Rider with a queer expression. He was angry, but there was grim humor also in his manner.

"What is your plan?" he asked.

"Well, sir," the Spy Navigator replied, "I hope you can suggest some retired hut, or cave, in the hills, where Orme can be taken. I know of a cave, but it is too far away to be considered."

"You want me to find such a refuge?"

"It will be very kind of you if you will."

"Have you seen Orme?"

"No; and I don't want to until the change of base has been made. I will, if you please, keep in the background and let you manage the matter. I am very anxious that Joseph and Vashti should not know that I am near."

"Why so?"

"Excuse me, but I can't explain that now."

"It don't matter," replied Mark, with a gracious wave of his hand.

"Then you agree?" eagerly asked Storm Rider.

"My dear sir, if I look as foolish as you seem to think me, I have only to be convinced of the fact and I will shave my head like what's-his-name, the old philosopher, get into a tub, and live there permanently."

"I don't understand," uneasily replied the Spy Navigator.

"I will try to explain. Since this affair began I have been treated to mystery without limit. It was a vast surprise when I saw a balloon rising from the backbone of Sawtooth Ridge; it was another surprise when I found our castaways there. I began my medical attendance without a selfish motive, but it was a good deal shaken when the Ormes refused to make any explanation of their situation. They would not tell how they came in this vicinity, far from civilization, nor would they give me light in any way. Now you pop up like a jumping-jack, and you have your pet mystery. Wait!—hear me out! You won't tell your name, nor how you came here; and though you declare that you are a friend of the Ormes, and wish to help them, you do not even want them to know that you are here."

Several times Storm Rider had tried to speak, but Hartley would not give way. The visitor now spoke eagerly:

"But—"

"Such being the case," relentlessly pursued the doctor, "I refuse to become your aid. I will not do what you ask, and if Joseph Orme leaves where he is, he and I sever connection then and there. That is my ultimatum!"

"My dear sir," cried Storm Rider, "your position is perfectly right from your point of view—"

"Just so—it is!"

"But you don't understand—"

"Right you are; I do not understand."

This grim, dogged humor seemed to shake the Sky Navigator. He hesitated before he spoke again.

"I am sure you are an honest man," he observed, at last.

"You do me proud."

"And a friend of the weak, helpless and deservng."

"I am willing to help those who help themselves, but I'm too old a bird to play blindman's buff."

"Do not speak rashly. Remember whom you are asked to help; remember Vashti Orme. She has enemies who would do her harm, and she is as good and true as ever woman was. For her sake, will you not aid us all?"

Storm Rider spoke earnestly—all the more so because he saw at the very beginning that he had touched a responsive chord when speaking of Vashti. Doctor Mark was not the man to hear an appeal made for a helpless woman and hear it in indifference.

He was far from being convinced, however.

"I have done something in this case already, and I am willing to do more," he answered; "but I will not aid in a move so threatening to Joseph Orme without having good reasons for it. I decline to work in the dark."

The persuasive hand which Storm Rider had stretched out fell to his knee.

"Heaven help us, then!" he almost groaned.

"Better help yourself."

"What can I do when you refuse me aid?"

"You talk like a child, and I don't care to prolong this interview unless we can strike a different vein. What little more we say, let us say to the point. I don't trust you so very much,

stranger. If you are so true a friend to Joseph and Vashti, why do you refuse to let them know you are here?"

"I can't tell you—"

Hartley abruptly rose.

"Enough!" he said tersely; "let us part here. I have business on hand, and I must ask you to take your departure."

"Are you going to the Ormes?"

"I decline to say."

"Let me have one promise, at least, from you—do not tell them you have seen me."

"That is just what I decline to promise; I shall assuredly tell them all about you. Having arrayed myself as their friend, I should be doing them a wrong not to tell of such a meeting as this with you. Say no more about it."

They had reached the door, and there Storm Rider paused for a moment. He bent a last look upon his young companion, and the light of the lamp which yet burned in the doctor's office fell upon the bronzed face. There was an expression there which gave Hartley uneasiness. If it had been one of anger, he would have thought nothing of it, but it was quite the reverse.

Sorrow, gloom and bitter disappointment rested upon the Sky Navigator's face, and he seemed utterly at a loss to know where to go.

Hartley, on his part, did not make haste. Even then there was time for his companion to change his mind if he wished, and Hartley hoped he would. He was disappointed. They went outside together, and then Storm Rider breathed an audible sigh and turned away.

He soon disappeared in the darkness.

Doctor Mark went on toward Graham's in a very thoughtful mood. As he approached he forgot the mysterious which made the case so peculiar and annoying, and thought only of the Outerbridge faction.

He had been to the City Hall, and his mission had utterly failed. Isaac's manner had done more than to rebuff him; it had plainly revealed the fact that Uncle Honest had seen his sons and put them in a dangerous mood. Hartley knew that they must be prepared for the worst; the misnamed peacemaker had been affronted, and his revenge was not likely to be trifling.

Mark paused before he entered the house. He wished that he could force himself to believe the opinion which nine-tenths of the people of Hornets' Nest had of Eliakim and his sons; he wished that he could regard them as just, honorable men, but the whole history of the mountain-locked town was against the idea.

"Heaven helped the Ormes, for my unaided hand will be but a weak shield!" the doctor murmured, as he resumed his way.

He re-entered the house.

He found Mr. and Mrs. Graham alone in the lower part, Vashti and Peggy both being with Joseph in his chamber, and an opportunity was vouchsafed for the cooler heads to reason together on the subject. Mark would have concealed his fears, but, finding his aged friends fully awake to the danger, he changed his mind and they talked freely.

It was agreed that whatever the result would otherwise have been, Vashti's refusal to confide in Uncle Honest had made that person an enemy, and that meant a good deal in Hornets' Nest.

When they considered the means of safety every plan was met and rendered useless by Joseph's condition, and they were forced to rely upon the solitary chance held out by the doctor.

If the Leather-Jackets did not at once strike—and as Joseph was so helpless, they might delay—there was a chance of outwitting them. Joseph would gain every day if properly cared for, and if this gain was concealed from the neighbors, he might advance toward recovery far enough to slip away before Outerbridge suspected danger.

Upon this small hope they decided to pin their faith and await the result.

This decision had just been arrived at when Vashti appeared. A change had come over the girl. She and Peggy had been with Joseph, and Peggy's buoyant spirits had put all three in good humor. For the time Vashti forgot that unknown danger which menaced her and Joseph, as well as the ominous visit of Uncle Honest, and the color had flowed back to her pale face until she seemed metamorphosed.

Such was her appearance when she appeared to Doctor Mark's view, and the latter could not but feel the influence of such a fair vision of the flesh.

He, too, forgot impending peril sufficiently to smile.

"Have you come from our patient, Miss Orme?"

"Yes."

"I trust he is doing well."

"He is doing very well, I think, thanks to your skill, doctor."

"More likely, thanks to his fair attendants."

Vashti smiled, but her mind passed to other matters.

"Have you seen Eliakim Outerbridge?"

"No; but I saw his sons."

"What did they say?"

"Nothing."

"Didn't you mention us?"

"Yes, but it was Eliakim I wanted to see."

"I detect an evasion, Mr. Hartley," said the girl uneasily. "Is there new danger?"

"Not to my knowledge; but I will admit that I did not like the manner of the young Outerbridges. I could get no satisfaction out of them, and I feel sure that the old man had filled them up with ideas of which we would not approve, to say the least. By the way, I have seen an old friend of yours."

"Of mine?"

"Yes."

"But I know no one here," Vashti answered, with a puzzled air; then, suddenly arousing, she added: "Was it Knifebelt?"

"The boy who ran away with the balloon? No. This man gave the name of Storm Rider." A quick change flashed over the girl's face, and she sprung to her feet.

"Storm Rider here!" she exclaimed excitedly.

"Yes."

"Where?—where? Take me to him! I want to see him at once!"

She looked around with growing excitement, as though expecting to see the Sky Navigator appear, but her hope was doomed to disappointment. Her emotion, her eager expectancy, her impatience and impetuosity were such that Mark was rendered incapable of speech, and her gaze finally became fixed upon his face with a penetrating regard which found only disappointment there.

"Where is he?" she repeated.

"He would not come here."

"Did he know I was here?"

"Yes, and that was why he would not come."

Vashti dropped into the chair again.

"Lost!" she exclaimed wildly; "we are ruined and lost!"

CHAPTER VII.

CUPID IN STRANGE COMPANY.

THE doctor looked at Vashti with growing wonder.

"I suppose it is all clear to you," he said, in a helpless way, "but I don't understand it at all."

The girl did not even seem to hear him. She was staring straight ahead, and her set, startled expression was like that of one who sees some alarming sight, but what she saw was a mental picture. Clearly, however, it was enough to cause her acute suffering.

A deep sigh finally passed her lips.

"What did he say?" she asked.

"He wanted me to help get you away from here."

"He saw the necessity, too!" the girl exclaimed.

"Probably," Doctor Mark grimly agreed.

"What did he advise?"

"Oh! he had a longing to be a cave-dweller, or something of that sort; at least, he suggested that I conduct you to a cave or deserted hut. Heaven bless us! how little does he know of this region! It is only a few years since the first white man slept near Sawtooth Ridge, and deserted huts are as scarce as hens' teeth. But we will let that pass."

"What did you answer him?"

"I answered," the doctor steadily returned, "that Joseph Orme could not be moved for several days."

A shadow flitted over Vashti's face.

"And then?" she questioned.

"I asked him to come and see you."

"And he refused?"

"Yes."

"It was because he had such terrible news that he dared not face us!" she feverishly exclaimed.

Hartley did not answer. He had no more questions to ask in relation to the mystery which surrounded Vashti and her brother. Actuated only by the best of motives he had tried to win their confidence, in order to work for them intelligently, but he had been met by rebuffs which he could not forget. He was resolved to try no more, and it must be confessed that his sympathy for Vashti was not of the liveliest kind.

"Storm Rider has completed his mission," she pursued, "and it must have been a complete failure."

Still Hartley did not answer.

"The sooner we get away from Hornets' Nest, the better," Vashti added.

"Where do you wish to go?" asked the doctor.

"To the wilderness."

"There is plenty of it around here."

"That must be our home."

"I want to say," Mark replied, "that you have more to fear from the Outerbridges than any other source. Remote as we are here, there is little danger of any enemy appearing to you. We have no telegraphic communication with the world at large, and only an apology for a United States mail. Hornets' Nest is little known beyond the mountains which hem it in, and a stranger might pass near, stopping at other towns, and never hear of us. Don't be afraid of the outside world."

"I don't see why Eliakim Outerbridge should persecute us," the girl slowly said.

"I can add nothing to what I have already

told you, but he is jealous of his precarious power here, and you have aroused his ready suspicions by declining to confide in him. And now I will take another look at my patient, and then leave him for the night."

He went to Joseph, and found him sleeping peacefully and well. Every symptom was favorable, and Doctor Mark would have regarded the case as trivial had it not been for the threatening aspect of the future. Joseph must keep his bed, and remain quiet for some days to come, if he expected to recover fully, and there was no knowing what rash act he might commit under the influence of the mysterious fear that was upon him and Vashti.

Hartley left the house to return home, and Mr. and Mrs. Graham retired for the night. Vashti and Peggy were left alone in the lower part of the house.

Between the girls a decided friendship was springing up. Peggy was pleased to have the company of one of her own years, while Vashti felt the mountain girl's sympathy and encouragement no less than her unfailing good humor.

Being satisfied that the young stranger was not to be turned from the path she was pursuing, Peggy worried her no more about it, and half an hour passed in unimportant conversation.

They were thinking of retiring, when a knock sounded at the outer door. It gave them a nervous start. Peggy, at least, knew that visitors were not common at that hour, though it was not particularly late, and they were in a mood to be troubled by small things. They exchanged an inquiring glance.

"Don't open the door!" whispered Vashti.

The knock sounded again.

"I don't see how I can help it," answered Peggy, "for the light shows that we are here."

"But it may be the Outerbridges."

"That is not likely, and even if it is, we can't keep them out if they see fit to enter."

A third time the knock sounded, and a growing impatience was expressed in it.

"You will have to answer it," Vashti agreed.

Peggy did so. She opened the door, and then a thrill of alarm passed over her. Two men were there, and they were Aaron and Peter Outerbridge.

Black-bearded Aaron was in front, and he nodded with courtesy unusual to him.

"Good-evening, Peggy," he said, quietly; "we have dropped around to see you a few minutes."

And without any invitation, the big Leather-Jacket walked in, followed by his brother.

Vashti's heart sunk. At first sight of the men she felt sure they were members of the Outerbridge family, and she found her apprehensions assailing her again with startling force. Was the blow already about to fall? She thought of Joseph and trembled.

Aaron and Peter were men not much more accustomed to ladies' society than were the wild animals of the mountains, but they showed no embarrassment. Self-invited, they found seats and settled down calmly. Peggy closed the door in a confused mood. She was not afraid of the Leather-Jackets in the usual sense of the word, but she knew their powers of mischief.

"I hope you are all well here," pursued Aaron, calmly.

"Yes," Peggy admitted, without the least idea of what she said.

"I suppose this is Miss Orme," he added.

"Yes."

"You are very welcome to Hornets' Nest, Miss Orme," pursued Aaron, with a stiff bow.

"Thank you, sir," answered Vashti, faintly.

"I am Aaron Outerbridge, deputy-sheriff, and this is my brother, Peter."

"We have called to be neighborly," observed Peter.

"And to pass the evening."

"In good company."

There was a tinge of the ludicrous in the brothers' words, but that side of the affair passed unnoticed by Vashti. If they were awkward, it was not the awkwardness of embarrassment, and their grim, stolid manner alarmed her more than ever. She noticed, too, that Aaron's gaze dwelt critically upon her, traveling over her face and her shapely form as he might have looked at a fine horse.

Peter looked at Peggy, and it was not the first time that he had looked at her. He had done this often since they met at Hornets' Nest, and he found pleasure in it. Peter had an eye for beauty, and as he found the beauty in Peggy, he liked to gaze upon her.

The latter was puzzled to understand why the brothers had come. If they had arrested Vashti and Joseph she would not have been surprised, but a peaceful visit was quite another matter.

As though by previous understanding attention was divided; Peter devoted himself to Peggy, while Aaron talked only with Vashti. Then Peggy began to suspect, and with the art of her sex on such occasions, she endeavored to make conversation general.

Woman never scored a more complete failure.

The Yellow-Jackets had a will of their own; and when a move was made the wrong way they were silent. Humored in their desires as to the way of conversation they were singularly pleas-

ant for them; opposed, they relapsed into grim, voiceless statues.

Peggy saw that it was dangerous to oppose them, and they had their way—each man talked to the lady of his choice, and to no one else.

Aaron gradually grew boastful. He gave his version of the history of Hornets' Nest, in which Uncle Honest appeared as a hero and a reformer; he drew a rose-colored picture of the town's future; and then he gave some idea of his own importance, and the power he possessed.

"Idaho is still a young Territory," he added, "but it has a glorious future before it. Mile after mile it stretches along the mountains, and there the richest mining districts of the future are located. People do not yet fully appreciate what we have here, and in the East few persons, perhaps, would give a thought to our precious ores, but they are here, and all the world will soon know it. Then California, Arizona and Colorado will hide their heads and never call themselves gold-producing places again."

Vashti found this highly-colored picture as uninteresting as what Aaron had said before, but she managed to make some kind of reply.

"When that day comes," added Aaron, "those who have good positions here now will be leaders known far and near; they will be millionaires by virtue of the gold dug from the mountains; and they can have the luxury and pomp of kings if they desire!"

The color heightened in his bronzed cheeks, and he looked strangely at Vashti. He seemed very much interested in his subject, and the girl began to experience new uneasiness. She determined to oppose his glittering prophecy, but he gave her no chance.

"I am one of these men," he went on, "and that glory shall be mine, but of what use will it be if I have to meet it alone? None whatever. My honored father realizes all this, and he has urged one thing upon his sons—he wishes us to marry!"

Aaron leaned forward in his chair, and his powerful eyes glowed with new light.

"My good father is always right," the speaker asserted, "and he is right on this point. I have decided to marry, and I came here to-night to see you. I had heard of your beauty, and I find it all it has been represented. You suit me. Will you marry me?"

Vashti looked at the burly wooer in speechless dismay, while the old pallor returned to her face and her clasped hands trembled perceptibly.

The object of Aaron's visit was clear at last.

Twice she tried to speak in vain, but Aaron waited, and she finally made answer:

"Thank you, but—but I can't think of it."

No change appeared in his stolid face.

"Why not?" he asked.

"Because I have too much else to do."

"I will do your work for you."

"Nobody can do it but myself."

Aaron stretched out his powerful right arm.

"What any one can do, I can do."

"You are very kind," stammered Vashti,

"but I cannot think of it."

"Do you object to me?"

She dared not answer in the affirmative; she was rash enough to begin her reply with the negative monosyllable. She intended to follow it up with an elaborate explanation, but he gave her no time.

"Then it is settled. As long as you don't object to me, you shall be my wife!"

CHAPTER VIII.

ANOTHER KNOCK AT THE DOOR.

PETER was talking so loudly to Peggy—the youngest of the Leather-Jackets, as before said, was of a less stolid nature than his companions—that this proposal almost by her side was unheard by her, but she did not fail to see the changes which went over the faces of Vashti and Aaron. She knew that fresh trouble menaced her friend, without being able to grasp the full meaning of it.

Vashti was filled with alarm, and she did her utmost to change Aaron's ideas. She dared not tell him how much of fear and repulsion he aroused in her mind, but she had excuses without number, which she poured out in unavailing argument.

If she had been able to truthfully say that she was already married, it would probably not have influenced the Leather-Jacket.

Quietly but stubbornly he met every argument, and she could see that he was determined to make her his wife, whether she agreed or not.

"There is no hurry about it," he added. "Any time within a week will do."

Within a week! What a miserable reprieve!

"We'll have a minister here from Snakefoot Pass, and the ceremony won't take long," Aaron went on. "From this time I shall watch over you. I'll drop in often, and get acquainted with your brother; and I'll see that the doctor does his duty. Doctors are only licensed cut-throats, anyway; but Hartley don't dare to trifle when he has me to deal with. I am a Leather-Jacket, and one of the rulers of Hor-

nets' Nest. I'll take good care of your brother—and of you!"

Vashti sat in silent despair. Where now was hope, except as it lay in prompt departure from the town?

"I reckon we shall make a good couple," added Outerbridge, complacently.

Still she had nothing to say.

"Have you lost your tongue?" he demanded, showing asperity for the first time.

She was saved from making a reply—once more a knock sounded at the outer door.

Both girls hailed it with inward joy. No one in Hornets' Nest would dare anger the Leather-Jackets, perhaps; but if the latter were not in a particularly pertinacious mood, a reprieve might be gained.

Peggy quickly arose. She saw by the scowl on the face of each of the Outerbridges that the interruption angered them, but they did not oppose her movements.

She opened the door.

A man at once entered and became the focus of all glances. To Vashti, at least, he appeared as a new creation, or, more properly, like a legendary person of old come to life. He looked ancient, though more as to dress than otherwise. He could have been but little past fifty years of age, but he was clad more like a Daniel Boone than a man of the West.

On his head was a fur cap made from the skin of some animal; a worn hunting suit which had once been fringed, but was only partially so then, covered his bony frame; his hair and beard had long been strangers to any art of trimming; and he carried a long rifle which was both ponderous and old-fashioned.

His bronzed face was homely and irregular, but it was honest and good-humored, and an air of tranquil composure hung about him.

No sooner did Peggy see him distinctly than she flew at him and, regardless of all who were looking on, flung her arms around his neck and kissed him unceremoniously.

"You dear old Yank!" she cried; "you venerable man of the mountains, are you really here again? Has some kind fairy dropped you down from the clouds? They couldn't find a better associate than Yank Yellowbird. And here is Moses, too. Moses, honest Moses, how are you?"

A big, shaggy, grim-looking dog had followed his master into the house, and it was to him the last words were addressed. Peggy left the man to hug the dog, an operation to which the latter submitted with some reluctance, it seemed. Moses was not given to levity; he believed that dogs should have dignity and maintain it, and he only yielded a point because Peggy was a pretty girl—at least, he may infer this from his manner.

"Land o' Goshen!" quoth the man with the long rifle. "It seems mortal pleasant ter see you ag'in, Peggy, but I consait I have come at the wrong time. Didn't know that you was havin' a picnic-party or anything o' the kind. Whar are the old folks? I'll go ter them—"

"Indeed you will not; you will remain right here with us. Nobody could be more welcome, and you are not going to leave my sight. Vashti, this is Yank Yellowbird, hunter, scout, and mountaineer."

"How de do?" genially responded the newcomer. "Glad ter meet yer. Always did have a partiality for the fair sect; runs in the Yellowbird family."

"I think you know these two gentlemen, Aaron and Peter Outerbridge," added Peggy, more doubtfully.

Yank turned his gaze upon the Leather-Jackets. His arrival had not pleased them, and they took no trouble to conceal the fact. He saw two scowling faces before him, and did not feel called upon to exert himself greatly for their sake.

"To be sure," he replied; "I seen them when I was hyar before."

Not a word answered the Leather-Jackets.

"But we didn't get very sociable," dryly continued the mountaineer.

He had taken a chair, and at a motion from him his dog lay down near him. The shaggy quadruped had nothing to do but to watch, and, for some reason, he gave prompt attention to Aaron and Peter. The charms of Vashti and Peggy had no influence upon the dog, but he seemed to think that the two young men would bear watching.

His master, on the contrary, first put his fur cap under the chair, and then beamed good-humoredly upon the girls. At first sight one would see but little besides good-humor in his plain, rugged face, but closer survey would show that plenty of firmness and resolution were back of the genial exterior.

"Where have you been all this while?" asked Peggy, devoting herself to Yank, to the utter exclusion of the other visitors.

"Everywhar," was the quiet reply.

"I dare say so. Do you know, Vashti, he wanders over all the West, accompanied only by Moses, his dog?"

"Could I have better comp'ny?" the mountaineer asked.

"I do believe not."

"Moses is an uncommon dog. He's got more

virtues than I could name in a week, an' I can't help thinkin' he was egregious lucky to be born a dog, not a man."

"He looks like an ill-tempered brute," observed Aaron Outerbridge, surlily.

"He is," Yank calmly agreed.

"Given to biting?"

"He kin bite a man's leg off at one gulp," modestly asserted Moses's master.

"He don't want to bite me."

"I see he don't."

"I mean that if he tried it I would kill him off-hand," was the vicious explanation.

"What d'ye s'pose he would be doin' while you was killin' him?"

"Dying!"

"Land o' Goshen! you don't seem ter know Moses. That dog is an uncommon product o' free's'ile. He don't molest nobody that lets him alone, but he's a voylent distemper ter whoever treads on his tail. He's got an atrocious big record as a slayer. The Sioux Injuns have out a standin' offer o' some thousand dollars ter whoever will shoot him, fur he has about depopulated the hull tribe. Many Sioux chiefs have a carved image o' Moses on their gravestones, jest ter show the complaint they died of."

"You talk nonsense!" tartly observed Aaron.

"I do?"

"Yes."

"How much d'ye ask fur your opinion?"

The tall mountaineer remained calm and unmoved, but Peggy was growing alarmed. She saw that Aaron resented the presence of the last caller, and that real viciousness actuated all that he said.

Peggy began to apprehend an open quarrel.

"I charge nothing," retorted Aaron, "but when I speak, men obey!"

"Sort o' a military chieftain, ain't ye?" gravely asked Yank. "My gran'father was a sojer—a Revolutionary relict—an' he was egregious great on the ticktacks o' war. What he didn't know about marches, counter-marches, wheel-the-right, an' ground-arms, wa'n't worth knowin'."

"What do I care about your grandfather?" sneered Outerbridge.

"About as much as he does fur you, prob'ly," composedly answered the mountaineer.

"Come, come!" interrupted Peggy, nervously: "I don't want you gentlemen to try to be funny. You are crowding us to the rear, and we object."

"Let the little woman have her say!" growled Peter. "I don't know you, you man in a rat-skin cap, but I say you can't put that gal down. I'm here as her champion, and when I say a thing in Hornets' Nest, it goes!"

"Hullo! you're another military chap, be ye?" asked Yank. "Spring up like weeds hyar, don't they? Wonder you don't carry epaulets in yer hand, an' wear swords on yer shoulders."

"I carry a rifle, and I know how to use it!" shouted Peter, savagely.

"Which end on't is most dangerous!" coolly asked the mountaineer.

With a furious exclamation the Leather-Jacket sprung to his feet, and his brawny hand jerked a revolver from his belt. Another moment would have seen a collision between him and Yank Yellowbird, but Peggy hastened to take place between them.

"Stop!" she cried, addressing Peter, "you shall not make a move against him without first attacking me!"

CHAPTER IX.

A MAN IN THE WAY.

THE Leather-Jacket's hand fell. This was a reception he did not expect, and it disarmed him of his will as nothing else could have done.

There was a brief pause, during which he stood confused before Peggy, but if he felt angry at being robbed of his chance to do mischief, he saw only a small part of what was really open to his gaze.

Hard fighter that he was he would never have done harm to Yank Yellowbird. Peter was a mere boy compared to the mountaineer, and the strong veteran, who had come successfully out of scores of conflicts with men who could have mastered the Leather-Jacket, only smiled at the headlong attempt to attack him.

If it had been pressed, Peter would have fared badly.

The shaggy dog, too, was interested. He was no longer prostrate on the floor. He had risen, and, crouched for a spring, he bent his flashing eyes upon Outerbridge, and only waited the word to leap at his throat.

It was Aaron who broke the painful pause.

He laid his hand firmly upon his brother's arm.

"Be calm, Peter," he said, in a voice which was thick and husky with his own passion. "We are not the men to engage in any broil."

Peter's gaze fell. He set his strong teeth tightly, hesitated, fought with himself, and then thrust the revolver back into his belt.

Without a word he walked to the window, pushed the curtain half aside, and stood looking out into the darkness.

"This is remarkable," muttered Aaron, still

struggling for the calmness he had advised Peter to summon.

"It's egregious funny," Yank calmly agreed.

"I didn't come here to be insulted."

"I am sure, Mr. Outerbridge," cried Peggy,

"that nobody wishes to insult you."

"Jest my opinion," coincided the veteran.

"You haven't seen the last of me!" declared Aaron.

"No?"

"This is a peaceful, law-abiding town, but I know how to deal with brawlers and ruffians."

"Broilers an' ruffians is good. How about bakers an' other common laborers?"

"Yank, will you be still?" Peggy implored.

"To be sure."

The mountaineer resumed his seat as composedly as though nothing had happened.

"Mr. Outerbridge," resumed the girl, "you are making a mistake—"

"What mistake?"

"Yank meant no harm."

Aaron laughed shortly.

"I like his harmless way!"

"You mistook his humor for something else—"

"I like his humor!"

The sneers of the man were too much for Peggy's composure. As he stood there his heavy form unconsciously inclined forward, as though he was about to rush upon Yank, perhaps he fancied that he was hiding his emotions, and there was a certain kind of calmness upon him, but the glare of his eyes he could not subdue, and the expression of his mouth was wolfish.

Peggy was terrified, and she lost her power of speech suddenly.

"I don't think anything more need ter be said," observed the mountaineer, breaking the silence. "It's a fam'ly maxim o' the Yellowbirds never ter quarrel in the company o' women o' the female sect, but ef yer want ter debate the p'int o' the case—I don't know what the case is by hurley—I'll call 'round at your shop ter-morrer."

His manner was as quiet as though no quarrel had disturbed the serenity of the occasion.

"I'll go," agreed Aaron, "but we shall meet again."

"Jes' so."

"You need not try to escape."

"I needn't eh? Now see hyar, mister, you mean wal, but you're awfully out o' bias an' plum'. When you see me *runnin'*, jest mention it, will ye? I'd like ter see the show, myself—I would, by hurley!"

Yank smote his knee with one broad hand, but Aaron did not answer.

Without a word or look to Peggy or Vashti he moved toward the door. Reaching that point, he first plucked Peter by the sleeve and then went out. The younger Leather-Jacket followed in utter silence, not once looking back.

A more ominous farewell it would have been hard to imagine, and Peggy and Vashti looked at each other in silent dismay.

"I'll be condemn'd ef I understand this!" declared the mountaineer. "We've had a tribulation about somethin'—I ain't no idee what—an' them atrocious insex have stalked off as grum as though they had a pain in their stum-mick. I consait they might have had one ef I'd been alone with them, fur their manner was out-an'-out sassy, but the Yellowbird gallantry won't allow me ter quarrel in the presence o' women-folks. But what's all the diffikilty about, anyhow?"

"Those men are our bitter enemies!" declared Peggy, with a shiver.

"Land o' Goshen! that so?"

"They have gone away angry, and now there is no knowing what they'll do."

"They don't want ter do anything mean!" retorted the mountaineer, frowning.

"They are capable of any evil act."

"To you?"

"Yes."

"An' do you think them likely ter try it?"

"Yes."

Yank brought his hand forcibly down upon his knee.

"Let 'em try it!" he retorted. "I don't know what has gone before this, but I'm byar now, an' no atrocious insex can persecute you—he can't, by hurley! You're my ward, Peggy, an' I'll take keer of you."

The speaker's bronzed face beamed with just indignation, and Peggy threw her arms around his neck.

"Dear old Yank!" she murmured; "you are still the same kind old friend; you are always ready to help the weak and deserving."

"It runs in my family. My first ancestor, Adam Yellowbird, who lived at the Garden o' Eden, was a powerful champion o' injured goodness. He rescued his wife, Eve Smith, from up'ards o' a thousand Hottentot warriors under a woman named Zenobia, who was jealous on her, an' then married Eve. The fam'ly has been at it ever sence, an' we've helped a good many folks. But this ain't ter the p'int—what's all this trouble about, anyway?"

Peggy told the story from the first sight Doctor Mark had had of the balloon.

It was not easy to tell, and make a good impression, for in the face of all stood the singular refusal of the Ormes to divulge their secret—to give any account of themselves—but Peggy made the best of it, and passed more lightly over the refusal of the Ormes to speak out than over the consequences thereof.

Vashti did not interrupt with any explanation; indeed, her appearance indicated that meditation at times rendered her unconscious of what was being said.

Yank heard the story in equal silence. Sitting quietly in his chair, he stroked his thin, ragged beard and said nothing, but not a word escaped him.

Peggy finished the story, and then there was a brief pause. Perhaps Yank was reluctant to break it; certainly, he regarded the policy of silence pursued by the Ormes as very singular—though no more than their right—and he would have been very credulous had he imagined that their course was actuated by any common motive.

Secrets, guilty or otherwise, were not to his liking, and he did not get the highest opinion of the Ormes, but he thought even less favorably of the Outerbridges.

"It seems very strange to me," said Vashti, breaking the silence, "that any party of men can rule so absolutely as these men do."

"I consait you ain't had the exper'ence in the West that some on us have," replied Yank. "It ain't no uncommon thing hyar, but we have an uncommon interest in this pertic'lar case."

"What can be done?" Peggy asked, anxiously. "You are brave and experienced—can't you show us some way?"

"I'll do my best, little woman, but in the face o' all endeavors stan's the fact that we've got a sick man on our hands who can't be moved. Ef it wa'n't fur that, I'd show you a way ter fool 'em."

"What way?" Vashti asked, eagerly.

"Ter run away."

"Can't it be done?"

"I don't see how it kin, when we have a man who is sick abed."

"Joseph will go at any time, if a horse, or other means of conveyance, is offered."

Vashti was true to her ruling idea. But Yank was not so easily persuaded. Having been told that a competent doctor had pronounced Joseph unable to go out, he was not the man to commit himself in favor of a rash plan.

He agreed to see Doctor Mark the following morning, however, and consider the case fully.

The mountaineer had become interested as soon as he saw that Peggy was anxious, and he also saw occasion to work for Peggy herself. There was no disguising the fact that Peter Outerbridge was as much interested in the girl as Aaron was in Vashti, and it was plain that the object of both was matrimony.

More dangerous lovers it would be hard to find. They were without any redeeming qualities, unless the Graham family greatly misjudged them, and their rule was absolute in Hornets' Nest.

Yank assumed a cheerful manner and finally dispelled the fears of the girls somewhat, and they consented to retire for the night. There was no bed for Yank, but this was a relief to him; he had so long been accustomed to wild life, and to sleeping in the woods and mountains with no cover but a blanket, that the mere thought of a bed made him shiver.

He was furnished with a blanket and left in the kitchen, but he had no intention of remaining there. Before he had parted with the girls he had formed a resolution, and it did not change.

When they were fairly gone he looked at the dog and nodded emphatically, and Moses at once rose to his feet and fixed an inquiring gaze upon his master.

"Jes' so—jes' so!" said the mountaineer, aloud. "Thar is work fur us ter do. We've been told that thar is atrocious plottin' afoot, an' we ain't goin' ter settle down byar'an' waste valerble time. I never had no great opinion o' the Outerbridge tribe, an' all that the little women fear seems ter be likely. It wouldn't s'prise me ef thar was an egregious diffikilty hyar, an' ef we're to have a share in it, we want ter use some jedgment. Ain't that so, Moses?"

The grim dog vibrated his tail, a proof of his attention which he would have vouchsafed to no one but his master, and Yank again nodded sharply.

"Ef the atrocious insex get the best o' the game it won't be our fault, but I consait we've got ter be up an' doin'. They've got the best holt, an' we've got ter make up somehow. We can't do it as we hev fit the Injuns in the past, fur one o' our tribe is a sick man, but ef we can't find some way ter worry the critters, we ain't worthy of the Yellowbird name."

By this time the veteran was ready for the outer air. He did not meddle with the door, but opening a window, motioned to Moses to leap through and then followed him.

He closed the window behind them, and the new adventure was begun.

CHAPTER X.

THE PERSUASION OF A REVOLVER.

NOT long did the mountaineer remain near the house. It was among one of the many suspicions in his mind that some of the Leather-Jacket tribe might be hovering near, and watching with some hostile object, so it was to his interest to make as little show as possible.

Closely followed by Moses he moved away to the distance of seventy yards. There he again paused near the wall of a building. No light burned inside, and his presence there seemed safe, while a better place could not have been found for the purpose he had in view.

Leaning upon his long rifle he looked back toward Graham's. Much of the intense darkness of the earlier part of the evening had disappeared, and he could see as plainly as he desired. He half-expected to see dusky figures prowling around the house, but minute after minute passed and nothing unusual appeared.

Yank gradually came to the conclusion that the house was not menaced, and the belief gave him decided relief.

His face cleared, and he aroused, threw his rifle across his shoulder and walked away. The dog, who was still ignorant of the work in hand, betrayed no curiosity, but marched quietly by his master's side, yet he was so well acquainted with Yank's habits that he knew some important work was on hand.

The mountaineer did not hesitate as to his course, but moved at once toward the center of the village. At that point the "City Hall" was situated, and that was his destination.

As he approached it first his belief was that it was deserted, but as he advanced nearer he saw a light shining dimly behind some sort of curtain. This was encouraging, for he knew enough of the place to feel sure that the Leather-Jackets were in consultation. Their office, only, was at City Hall, and they lived elsewhere.

Going close to the building he found his view obstructed by a blanket which served as a window-curtain, while the window was tightly closed. He could hear no sound inside, but the light still burned.

While he was considering what to do the sound of footsteps near at hand reached his ears. He pressed close to the side of the building and waited. A dark figure appeared not far away. At first discovery seemed inevitable, but the man passed near him and went straight to the office door.

He rapped in a peculiar way and the door was opened. As the light shone out for a brief space of time it fell upon the face of Uncle Honest, and as Yank had seen him once before, he did not pass unrecognized.

The "Peacemaker" entered the office.

Yank did not fail to improve the chance offered him. Well aware that the attention of all who were within would be diverted, he seized the chance and raised the window slightly.

It was then easy to push the blanket aside a little, and the interior was revealed to the mountaineer's gaze.

He saw three persons there beside Uncle Honest; the old man's stalwart sons were assembled in grim conference, it seemed. Aaron and Peter were seated, while Isaac had just admitted his venerable parent.

"Well, dear boys," quoth Uncle Honest, "how are you all? I dare say everything is well?"

"So—so," growled Isaac.

"Have you been here all the evening?"

"Yes."

"And Aaron and Peter?"

"Yes."

"Where have they been?"

"Looking around," replied Aaron, in a surly voice.

A smile flitted across Yank's face; it was plain that the younger Leather-Jackets did not wish to make their wooing public until it had assumed a more favorable aspect. No wonder Aaron was in an ugly mood; he had made an offer of his heart and hand, and had been obliged to let the matter rest at a very vexatious stage.

"Anything new outside?" asked Eliakim, as he sat down and smoothed his patriarchal beard slowly.

"No," briefly replied Aaron; then, after a pause, he more slowly added: "There is one item of news."

"What is that?"

"You have heard of Yank Yellowbird, the mountaineer who is called 'Nevermiss' by the Indians?"

"Certainly, son."

"He is in Hornets' Nest."

"What of that?"

"He is at Graham's."

"Ah!" pronounced Uncle Honest, significantly.

"Moreover, he is a fast friend of the family. Perhaps you remember that it was he who brought the girl, Peggy, here, and gave her to the Grahams."

"I remember, though I had not given it much thought. Yes, I was aware that Peggy was only an adopted child of the Grahams. But

what has Yellowbird to do about it? How came she in his care?"

Aaron glanced at Peter, who hastened to reply:

"Her folks died, and, as the mountaineer was a friend, he took charge of Peggy and brought her here."

A sneering smile appeared on Isaac Outerbridge's face. He was not a victim of the tender passion, and he despised Peter for having yielded to Peggy's charms. Curiously enough, Uncle Honest knew less about Peggy's history than the other inhabitants of Hornets' Nest. He made it a point to keep well informed in regard to everybody's private affairs, but Peggy was only a young girl, and he had paid less attention to her.

"The point is this," added Aaron, whose own interests were identical with Peter's; "Yellowbird is a friend of the Grahams, and he will be in our way."

"I see."

The senior Outerbridge tapped his long fingers upon his knee thoughtfully.

"Yellowbird is a dangerous man," he added, his mild voice losing some part of its blandness.

"That's the trouble."

"He has a remarkable reputation as a brave, shrewd man, and it is hard to baffle him in any case he espouses."

"Bah!" observed Isaac.

"Well, my son?"

"The lank mountaineer is only human. His past successes are owing to the fact that he has had weaklings to deal with. If he interferes here it will be at his peril. Should he announce himself champion of the Graham crowd, let me know, and I will take care of him."

The listening mountaineer smiled calmly. He had heard vain talk before, and if circumstances had been favorable he would not have been reluctant to give the Leather-Jacket a chance to show his abilities. In the present case, however, he did not forget that the disability of Joseph Orme and the absolute power of the Outerbridges gave them a vast advantage.

"He must be taken care of," Eliakim agreed.

"Don't give it a thought," advised Isaac, waving his hand as though he disposed of Yank then and there.

"Well, as to your prisoner," said Uncle Honest. "The report which I received is very confusing. What have you got, anyway?"

"The balloonist."

"No!"

"Yes."

"But the balloon struck a current of air and drifted away toward the northwest."

"Winds change, like everything else. The balloon struck another current of air and drifted back."

"That is remarkable."

"Not at all. Well, the balloon drove back almost to where it started from earlier in the day—which was odd—and the aeronaut threw out his grappling-irons and came to anchor. He then fell into my hands by chance, as I was moving about Sawtooth Ridge, and I captured and brought him here."

"And he is here now?"

"Yes; in the next room."

"But refuses to talk?"

"Yes."

"Bring him out!"

Uncle Honest spoke decisively, and his nose went down toward his chin with even more of the hawk-like dive than usual.

Isaac arose, went to a door at the further side of the office and disappeared in an adjoining room. Not long was he gone. He returned leading a man, or, more correctly, a boy who was partially bound.

This person had not yet reached his twentieth year. He was a slender youth, with a delicate form and a smooth, girlish-looking face. No great amount of firmness was indicated by that face, and just at that moment, it bore a look of alarm.

Isaac set him before Uncle Honest, proceeding as grimly as usual, whereupon Eliakim bestowed a prolonged glance upon the prisoner. The elder man presented an appearance less grim than that of his sons, and the boy manifestly took courage.

"Boy, who are you?" asked the Peacemaker.

"My name is Knifebelt," was the faint response.

"A warlike name."

"I am not a warrior, sir."

The Leather-Jackets smiled.

"You are the balloon-navigator, eh?"

"Yes, sir."

"Late with Joseph Orme and his sister?"

Knifebelt looked alarmed again.

"I don't know anything about them, sir," he replied.

"My dear boy, what are you afraid of?" benevolently asked Eliakim. "If you knew me as well as the people of Hornets' Nest do, you would not hesitate to trust me. I am the leading man of the place, and regarded as a father by all. Uncle Honest, they call me—honest Eliakim Outerbridge!"

He waved his hands in a way as eloquent as

his verbal argument, but Knifebelt was not convinced.

He stood silent.

"Won't you tell Uncle Honest?" blandly persisted the old man.

"I can't tell what I don't know, sir."

"You can tell where you met the Ormes—"

"I never heard of them until to-night."

"Do you deny that you left them on Sawtooth Ridge and ran away?"

"Yes, sir."

"Why do you waste words on him?" sharply demanded Isaac. "The Orme girl plainly stated that their fellow air-voyager was named Knifebelt, and now this youngster owns up to the name. That proves him the person, and I haven't the patience to listen to his lies. He wants another kind of persuasion!"

Quickly drawing a revolver, the speaker presented it to Knifebelt's head and fiercely added:

"Speak, you dog! or I will blow your head off!"

The boy fell upon his knees.

"Spare me! spare me!" he shrilly cried, his terror showing in every way.

Isaac seized him roughly by the collar.

"Speak!" he shouted.

"They will kill me if I do!" wailed the boy.

"I shall kill you if you don't!"

"My son," mildly interposed Uncle Honest, "do not injure the youth."

"He is safe if he talks; if he refuses, I shall shoot him at once!"

"That is fair," blandly agreed Eliakim.

Knifebelt looked wildly around.

"Will nobody help me?" he implored, in abject terror.

"We'll help you out of the world," growled Isaac.

"Spare me!" groaned Knifebelt.

Isaac shook him as a dog would a cat.

"You little fool!" he cried, "I've had enough of this. Do you think I will waste time over such a creature as you? No!—by the demons, no! For the last time, will you tell what we want to know?"

CHAPTER XI.

KNIFEBELT DOES NOT KNOW.

THE revolver was thrust rudely into Knifebelt's face, and the courage of the boy gave way entirely.

"Stop! stop!" he cried, frantically; "don't shoot me! I'll tell all I know!"

Isaac laughed shortly, and, with one effort of his strong arm, set the boy upon his feet.

"You've saved your life," he curtly observed, "now see that you take care of it."

"I think the little boy will talk now," mildly added Uncle Honest. "Of course it would be a dreadful thing to have him shot, but the law must be enforced. I am a peace maker and a reformer, and my beloved fellow-citizens would not revere me if I did not look after their interests."

The tragedy was at least averted and Yank Yellowbird, who had watched all, breathed freer. He had not any time considered Knifebelt in danger, for the men would be very foolish to thus dispose of an important witness; but the mountaineer had stood with his rifle ready for use, and Knifebelt was not so unprotected as he had seemed.

The incident had been sufficient to remove the last doubt from Yank's mind. He saw the Leather-Jacket League revealed in a way which confirmed Cyrus Graham's suspicions and showed how warped was the judgment of such men of Hornets' Nest as looked up to Uncle Honest and his sons as superior beings.

To the mountaineer, at least, they were revealed as mere desperadoes, and Eliakim's continued mildness only showed how deep was his deceit.

Uncle Honest motioned toward a chair, and Isaac condescended to place it for the trembling Knifebelt.

"Now, little boy," croaked the old man, "let me see you answer every question plainly. I should be dreadful sorry to see you anger the sheriff again."

"I'll tell all I know," said the youth, humbly. "What about this balloon, of which I hear so much?"

"It belongs to Storm Rider."

"Who is he?"

"I don't know much about him. He took me a year ago, and asked me if I would like to learn to be an aeronaut. I was poor and friendless, so I said yes; and I went with him. I've been with him ever since, but not a thing has he ever told me about himself. The Indians call him Storm Rider, because they think he goes up in the sky over all storms."

"Where is he now?"

"He went away somewhere for the Ormes."

"What was his object?"

"I don't know, but—"

"Wait a bit; let us go in order. Who are the Ormes, anyway?"

"That I don't know. I saw them first six weeks ago. We landed by chance somewhere in Colorado. We caught on a ridge, and Storm Rider left me with the balloon and went to a town near at hand. He was gone a long time, and when he came back the Ormes were with

him. Something had happened to them, for they were pale, nervous and trembling, and Storm Rider, who had always been like a man of iron before, was almost as bad as they."

"What was the name of that Colorado town?"

"I don't know. I asked my master, but he would not tell me."

"Haven't you any idea where it was?"

"It must have been in Northern Colorado; that is all I know."

"H'm! Well, what happened next?"

"My master took the Ormes into the balloon, and we started off again. We drifted this way, and did not make another landing until we reached the mountain north of here, where you saw the balloon."

"Wait! Why did your master take the Ormes?"

"That is what puzzles me."

"Why so?"

"It seems they were strangers to him, and they were very reluctant to go with us; but Storm Rider urged them strongly, and there seemed to be something they were very much afraid of there."

Uncle Honest nodded his head wisely.

"I don't doubt it. But didn't you catch anything that was said?"

"Nothing that gave me any clew."

"Do you know what the Ormes were afraid of?"

"I got the idea it was some party of men."

"No doubt—no doubt," Eliakim agreed.

"But why was Storm Rider so interested in them if they were strangers to him?"

"That is the biggest puzzle of all, and it seemed to puzzle the Ormes just as much."

"How so?"

"I have overheard them talking about him, and they tried to think why he should work for them so hard. They had never seen him before, or heard of him, yet he was as much interested as though they were old and valued friends."

"And did they never solve the mystery?"

"I think not."

"Well, what happened after you landed on Sawtooth Ridge?"

"We anchored the balloon in a retired place, found a cave and stayed there a month."

Eliakim and the Leather-Jackets looked at the speaker in amazement. They were not prepared for any such statement as that.

"We were away over on the north side," continued Knifebelt, "and I for one, never suspected that a town was near. Storm Rider was the only one who ever went out, and he told us we were not near any human habitation. He must have known different, and I think he said that to keep the Ormes from being afraid. Finally he went away."

"Storm Rider?"

"Yes."

"Where did he go?"

"I haven't any idea. He had a long talk with the Ormes, and I think they confided their story to him, and that he went away to investigate something about their case."

"That is plain enough," interrupted Isaac. "The Ormes are criminals; the pursuit they feared was that of officers of law; and this Storm Rider allowed himself to become their accomplice."

"It does look that way," admitted Uncle Honest.

Aaron frowned and shook his head. Since he had seen Vashti he was not so anxious to have her prove a criminal. Knowing the power of the Leather-Jackets he was more anxious to use it to frighten the girl, and compel her to marry him, than to bring actual legal trouble upon her.

"You say you have not seen this Storm Rider since?" continued Uncle Honest.

"I have not," answered Knifebelt.

"Nor heard from him?"

"Not a word."

"Haven't you any idea when he will return?"

"No."

"What happened at the cave after he left?"

"We stayed at the cave a long time, but finally saw some men near. Perhaps they were only hunters, but they frightened us—the Ormes, at least—and we determined to go away—or, rather, the Ormes made me. I got the balloon ready, and we were all going together, but Joseph, who was helping me, was so ignorant and careless that the balloon went up too soon, and I was carried away alone, leaving them on the ground."

Knifebelt's manner had grown hesitating and confused, and Yank Yellowbird, at least, decided that he was giving a false account of his parting from the Ormes.

"How did Joseph get hurt?" asked Eliakim.

"I don't know."

"Didn't you throw him out of the balloon?"

Knifebelt started nervously.

"I? Oh! no, sir."

"I don't believe you, but that part is of no consequence to us. What we want to know is more about Joseph and his sister."

The Peacemaker then subjected the boy to a severe cross-examination. He thought that Knifebelt had told the truth until the episode of

the last flight was reached, but that some chance expression, regarded by the boy as of no value, might give him a clew to who the Ormes really were, and what danger they feared.

Slowly and carefully he asked his questions, making the witness dwell upon each event of the past, but he only succeeded in emphasizing the fact that when he first saw the Ormes they had been under the influence of great fear; and that, beyond doubt, they had been fleeing from some enemy, or enemies. Storm Rider had been unaccountably interested in them—much to their own surprise—and while hiding in the cave, they had hardly ventured to step outside.

Uncle Honest abandoned his attempt to get news after awhile; it seemed wholly useless.

He leaned back in his chair, and everybody seemed to do some active thinking.

Yank was not negligent on this point. He believed that Knifebelt had told the truth except as to what had occurred when Joseph was injured, and the mystery of the Ormes was rendered more puzzling. Yank's faith was a good deal shaken. He had as yet seen Vashti only a short time; he had not seen Joseph at all; and his only excuse for engaging in their defense was the fact that Peggy had a good opinion of them.

"I must look closter inter this ter-morrer," thought the veteran, uneasily.

Uncle Honest finally aroused from meditation and informed Knifebelt that he would remain in the rear office for the present, with Isaac for a companion. Nominally, the Peacemaker explained, the boy would be a prisoner, but it was only to guard him from harm; he would be well-used, and if he did not deceive his present companions, no harm would come to him.

Isaac took the boy into the rear room, and then the other Outerbridges prepared to go.

When convinced that there was to be no private talk among them, Yank moved quietly away. He did not want to be seen, and it would be useless to dog their steps. Of one thing, however, he felt confident—the Leather-Jackets were dangerously in earnest in their investigation, and, guilty or innocent, Joseph and Vashti were in great danger.

The Outerbridges had the will and the power to make them suffer severely. The outlook was dark.

CHAPTER XII.

PEGGY BRAVES THE LION'S WRATH.

THERE was no further trouble at Graham's house that night. Yank and Moses slept in the kitchen, and if any prowler had come near the building he would have done remarkably well to escape being heard by them. They heard nothing, and the inmates of the place passed a peaceful night.

All except Joseph met at the breakfast table, and young Orme's condition was certainly greatly improved as far as an inexperienced person could judge. Nearly all pain was gone, and he privately assured Vashti that they would leave the village before noon.

Acting on these sanguine plans he arose and tried his powers. He soon found how limited they were. He took a few steps without trouble; then a sharp pain shot through his injured hip; he staggered and would have fallen had he not caught hold of the bed. Succeeding the pain came a sudden feeling of illness, and he was glad to seek a recumbent position again.

Doctor Mark arrived soon after. Joseph was feeling a natural depression of spirits in consequence of his failure, but he concealed the knowledge of the attempt and assumed a cheerful air.

Hartley considered the case and gave his verdict.

"You are decidedly better, and with due care you need apprehend no permanent ill effects, but you must keep your bed for a few days longer."

"Doctor," urged Orme, "I want to resume my journey very much."

"I forbid it. The consequences might be lifelong lameness—the state of a cripple—while as for walking as you are, it would soon bring back the pain. I doubt if you could walk across the room without receiving a pain that would utterly cripple you for a few moments, like a severe rheumatic twinge."

Joseph's face fell. He knew better than any one else how accurately Hartley had diagnosed a part of the case. If he could judge as well on the minor point—which Joseph had tested to his sorrow—might he not be equally correct as to the permanent effects?

Doctor Mark did not prolong the discussion. As before shown, he felt vexed at the position taken by the Ormes, and the would-be sympathetic friend had relapsed into the calm, resolute physician.

He gave his directions, and then quietly left the house after promising to call again during the afternoon.

Peggy, who was never backward in observation, saw that Vashti noticed and felt the doctor's coldness. Her gaze followed him gravely, if not sadly, and her expression was subdued. She had had time to meditate on his unselfish kindness of the previous evening, and though

she was not ready to tell her story, she was anxious to number Hartley with her valued friends.

He, however, without exhibiting unbecoming resentment, was too distant to make her plan feasible. When a doctor retires into his professional dignity like a snail into its shell, as it were, that dignity is about as impervious as a flint rock.

Vashti was awed, and no understanding was arrived at between them.

Yank had told Peggy that he was going to talk with Hartley, and might go away with him for a short time. The veteran had waited outside the door, and she saw him accost the doctor. They talked for a few moments, and then walked toward Hartley's office.

The minutes passed on until they grew to hours. Peggy devoted her time to cheering Vashti and Joseph, and the forenoon was not wholly one of trouble. Peggy was seldom deprived of her light spirits, and she was a real consoler to her companions. All tried to be gay, but it was not a pronounced success.

Uncle Honest and the Leather-Jackets were not forgotten, and it was as though a dark, threatening cloud was hanging, half-visible, over them.

Yank did not return, and though no one would utter a doubt, this finally became the source of some worry.

Vague uneasiness was destined to give place to something more tangible and serious.

Vashti had been in Joseph's room, but descended to the kitchen for a few moments. She approached the front window and looked out. Scarcely had she done so before she made a sudden start. She had seen something which held her attention, and seemed to turn her to a statue.

Several men were approaching the house in a body. They marched on with the air of those who have a settled purpose, and what that purpose was Vashti could surmise all too well when she recognized them.

At their front walked Uncle Honest, while the Leather-Jackets were close behind.

Ominous visitors!

After the Outerbridges came several other men, and they bore the very litter upon which Joseph had been brought to the village the previous day. This was as suggestive as the party of men, and Vashti experienced a sickening feeling of terror. At first she was like one stunned, and unable to move, but as a full realization of the danger flashed upon her, she tried to turn and go to her brother.

Vain effort!—she seemed chained to the spot; her limbs would not obey the dictates of her judgment.

The ominous party paused in the yard, and Uncle Honest advanced toward the door. That broke the spell, and Vashti turned and fled to Joseph's room.

The Peacemaker did not bother with the formality of knocking. He entered the house, and after him came the three Leather-Jackets. At that moment the kitchen was deserted by all, and the intruders did not pause there. They knew where to look for their prey, and up the stairs they marched. Once there they heard sounds which they were not at loss to interpret—the desperate fugitives were trying to drag the furniture forward and barricade the door.

Isaac sprung forward and drove his broad shoulder against the frail obstacle. There was no lock upon the door, and though it had been partially barricaded, it flew open at once and the striking scene within was revealed.

Joseph had risen in his desperation, regardless of his injuries, and was aiding Vashti to drag the bed toward the door, but this plan of defense was rendered useless by the entrance of the Leather-Jackets. Brother and sister stood dumfounded, but the voice of Uncle Honest arose as bland as ever.

"Be calm, my children! There is no occasion for fear."

"Why are you here?" panted Vashti, in an agony of fear.

"For you, my dear."

"For me?"

"You and your worthy brother."

"What do you want of us?"

Uncle Honest's voice had never been milder than when he replied:

"I think the law wants you!"

Joseph's hand fell to the bed beside which he stood. Upon it lay a revolver, and he had a mad idea of resisting to the last, but his knowledge of fighting, gained in the East, was not up to the times with the way of the headlong West. Isaac, alert and venomous, sprung quickly forward, and before Joseph could turn the weapon upon the intruders, it was wrested from his hand.

Isaac's fingers sought Orme's neck.

"You scoundrel!" he began, sibilantly, but the voice of the venerable Peacemaker interrupted him:

"Calmly, calmly, my dear boy! Let no act of undue excitement be done here. Good will to men is my motto; I hope it is that of my boys."

Isaac's hand fell; turbulent as he was the mild voice of his father somehow exercised

strong ascendancy over him. He fell back, still holding the revolver.

Joseph stood with a pale, set face, while his breast arose and fell with quick, gasping respirations. He was not a coward in the ordinary sense of the word, but he knew that he was utterly in the power of the Leather-Jackets. To fight would be folly; he adopted another course—one little more promising.

"What means this outrage?" he demanded, unsteadily.

Uncle Honest hollowed his hand and held it near his ear with a pretense that he had not heard.

"How?"

Joseph repeated his question.

"I know of no outrage," the Peacemaker replied. "We are come to arrest you, and my boy tried to prevent you from committing further crime."

"Why am I arrested?"

"You will be told at the City Hall."

Joseph looked despairingly at Vashti, but at that moment Peggy flashed into the room. Her face was flushed; her eyes were sparkling; her pretty lips were closed with ominous closeness—in brief, there was ample evidence that Peggy was angry.

She confronted Uncle Honest like a Nemesis.

"What are you doing here?" she cried.

Uncle Honest smiled and bowed very low.

"My dear young lady, I am charmed—"

"Who let you into this house?" demanded Peggy, with spirit. "Nobody! You come in like thieves! Who told you that you might enter this room? Nobody! You did the thief act again, and you are answerable to the law. You shall answer to it, too, if I have to go all the way to Boise City to lodge the complaint."

Very pretty looked Peggy then, with the color flooding her cheeks and her eyes sparkling, but Eliakim Outerbridge was past the age of romance. He heard without admiration—without visible emotion.

"There is all the law here that is needed," he composedly replied.

"Law!" echoed Peggy. "Do you call your reign law?"

"What do you call it, child?"

"Infamous persecution!"

"Children will be children!" observed Uncle Honest, with a sigh. "Sheriff, delay no longer. Bring your prisoners!"

He turned away, and Isaac again advanced. Joseph breathed heavily, and his courage arose in arms, but Vashti moved to his side. Not a word spoke she, but her hand was laid upon his. He met her gaze, and the useless impulse to resist was quelled. He struggled with himself for a moment, and then huskily said:

"I will submit, because I can do no other way, but I cannot walk."

"The litter is at the door," Isaac briefly answered.

"I am ready."

Joseph turned away. He completed dressing by putting on his coat and boots, and, as he had said, was ready. Aaron advanced toward Vashti, but Peggy stepped before him.

"If I was a man," said she, firmly, "you should not conquer here. As it is, if you insist upon taking Vashti prisoner, I insist upon being a prisoner, too!"

CHAPTER XIII.

UNCLE HONEST REPRESENTS THE PEOPLE.

PETER OUTERBRIDGE'S face brightened as he heard this announcement. For the first time in his life he was not in sympathy with his father's rule. If Peter could have had his way, the crusade against the Ormes would have been dropped, because, forsooth, it would tend to lessen Peggy's resentments.

A short time before the Leather-Jacket had been a man of war, and nothing more, but gradually the charms of a woman had divided his allegiance and his thoughts. Stronger had grown the influence of the woman—though it was not aided by even a word from her—until Peter lived and moved in a world made up of light, of air, and of Peggy.

All other influences, even that of war, had grown weak.

Now Peter was pleased to hear Peggy announce herself thus, for if she went along he might find chance to render her many little attentions that would win her sympathy and her love. He had an idea that the key to woman's heart was kindness, and that only; which shows that Peter did not know woman well.

Unless Cupid, the most uncertain, erratic and incomprehensible of all the gods and goddesses, sees fit to turn the aforesaid key, when once it is made of kindness, the woman is as indifferent to the delicate bribe as though it had never existed.

Peter looked anxiously toward his father.

"We have nothing to arrest you for," said Uncle Honest, answering Peggy.

"Then I will go along as Miss Orme's companion."

"Just as you wish, my dear, but I must ask you to make haste. I have important business on hand, and can delay no longer."

The venerable Peacemaker's explanation was not so truthful as it might have been. He knew

that Doctor Mark and Yank Yellowbird had gone up the steep side of Sawtooth Ridge together, and he wanted the prisoners fully in his power before the men returned.

Confident that all the resistance he would meet would come from them, it was well to make the master-stroke before they could interfere.

Joseph made another effort to learn why they were arrested, but his words lacked the force of one whose mind is at ease.

It was a half-hearted attempt, and brought no good result. The Peacemaker refused to explain until they reached the City Hall.

All was soon ready, and they left the house. Aaron and Peter aided Joseph, and it was noticeable that they showed real consideration. The stout young men had not forgotten Vashti and Peggy.

Joseph was carried to the City Hall on the litter, and the Ormes and Peggy were taken to the office. After that the guard was dismissed, but the word had been given out that the preliminary examination would begin just an hour later.

The guard departed and spread the news, and it was soon all over Hornets' Nest. Something like a sensation was created. People talked, and were of one mind. Honest Eliakim Outerbridge, ever diligent in the cause of law and justice, had made an arrest of desperate criminals. Who they were, or what their crime was, the citizens did not know, but all declared their belief that Uncle Honest would preserve the sanctity of the town, and, at the same time, deal with the prisoners with his usual merciful kindness.

Very fortunate Hornets' Nest considered itself to have an Uncle Honest to conduct its affairs.

Adjoining the office was a larger room, where the public business of the town was conducted. By the hour set for the examination, this place was crowded; nearly everybody had come to see and hear what had occurred.

In due time the principal actors in the scene made their appearance from the office. First came Isaac, tall, erect and stern; then followed Joseph, led by Aaron and Peter; while Vashti, Peggy and Eliakim brought up the rear.

This party went at once to the platform, where the prisoners were given seats.

Uncle Honest made a brief address. He told the people that the public good had seemed to demand the arrest of the Ormes, and that, further than that, they must look to the examination to inform them. He told how the prisoners had been found, and then announced that he would proceed to question them.

"Joseph Orme!" he pronounced, in a louder voice.

"I am here," answered Joseph, mechanically.

"You may remain seated. You are now in a court of justice, and the people will listen to your statement."

"I have none to make."

"How?"

"I have no story to tell," repeated Joseph.

"But the people are here to listen."

"Circumstances prevent my making any statement."

Joseph spoke stubbornly, and Uncle Honest looked at the spectators and shook his head gravely. It was always his way on such occasions to put the "people" forward very prominently—in words. This flattered their vanity, and blinded them to the fact that Outerbridge was an absolute ruler.

"This is very odd!" quoth Eliakim, while his nose made the sharpest of hawk-dives toward his chin.

Not a word answered Orme.

"Why do you refuse to explain?" continued Uncle Honest.

"We have talked of this before."

"Informally, only. You are now before the people."

"I don't believe the people care to pry into my private affairs."

Eliakim cleared his throat significantly. He looked benignly at "the people," as though to gain moral courage, and wagged his gray beard with a grave shake of his head.

"Honest men have nothing to conceal," he observed.

"It seems that they have something to fear!" retorted Joseph, growing angry.

"Fear?"

"That is what I said."

"Perhaps you will explain."

"I think no explanation is needed when I am dragged here like a dog simply because I do not see fit to tell everybody my private affairs. It is infamous!"

Eliakim lifted both hands in horror.

"This to the people!" he exclaimed, like one greatly shocked.

"Don't mix the people with yourself—you, not they, arrested me, and it is you whom I blame."

Joseph had seen that Eliakim's arts were influencing the crowd, and with a sudden return of prudence he tried to avoid angering the rough but, possibly, well-meaning persons before him; but he was promptly shown what a task he had undertaken.

"Don't soft-soap us, young feller!" shouted a burly miner; "we back up Uncle Honest, ev'ry time. He's as good as gold."

"Hurrah fur Uncle Honest!" cried another gold-digger.

The cheers were given with a vim which made the room shake, and brought a troubled expression to Joseph's face. Peggy leaned toward him.

"Don't anger them!" she whispered. "They all follow Outerbridge as a dog does its master."

"What's that?" demanded Isaac. "No private talk there, girl, or I'll have you up for conspiracy!"

Peggy forgot her own wise advice at once, and answered with her usual plainness.

"Keep your advice to yourself, sir; I'll manage my own affairs, if you please."

Isaac's bronzed face reddened with anger.

"Rest easy, girl; we have nothing to say to you now, but your turn will soon come!"

The look which accompanied the threat startled Peggy, and it did not tend to reassure her when Peter touched her shoulder and said in a whisper:

"Don't anger him!"

The warning was significant. Peggy could not be ignorant of the fancy the youngest Leather-Jacket had for her, and if he discerned danger there was, indeed, good grounds for apprehension.

"I should say that further waste of time is folly," continued Isaac, addressing his father. "We have given the prisoners chance to explain, and they have refused it. Now let the people know the truth."

Uncle Honest sighed heavily.

"It is a painful duty which devolves upon me," he sadly answered, "but dearer to me than aught else is the welfare of Hornets' Nest. We must be purged of all wrong, by fire if need be; by milder means, if possible. Mournful, indeed, is the necessity which makes me buckle on my battle-armor, but my chosen people must be protected."

"Hurrah fur Uncle Honest!" shouted the big miner.

Again the cheers rung out with a will, and Eliakim stretched out his hands as though pronouncing a benediction. Evidently he was deeply affected, for his grizzled beard trembled violently, and he wiped his eyes with a dingy handkerchief.

"Bless you all!" he finally said, tremulously. "I am an old man, but this proof of your friendship and confidence is dear to my heart."

Peggy's pretty nose was perceptibly elevated in the air, but she wisely remained silent.

The Peacemaker struggled with his manly emotion and finally regained his voice.

"Honored fellow-citizens," he resumed, "you shall now hear why I have arrested this man and woman. You have seen them here; you have marked their manner; you have heard them refuse to tell their story. Is not this a trifle strange?"

Half of the crowd were anxious to reply.

"Durned strange!"

"You kin bet they're crooks."

"Look on 'em fur counterfeit money."

"Honest folks hev nothin' ter conceal."

These terse sentences were shouted among others, and it was plain that Eliakim's crafty course had attached all irrevocably to his standard—carry the banner where he might, they were ready to follow.

"You are right, worthy neighbors, it is very strange, and I am prepared to prove that your worst suspicions are all too correct: to prove that the fair fame of Hornets' Nest is tarnished by the presence of these unhappy wretches."

Sighing again, the Peacemaker drew from his pocket a paper of some size. He unfolded it deliberately and held it up before him.

"Listen while I read," he directed. "This document tells a story of rare interest in connection with this case. Hear it, and judge whether the prisoners are guilty!"

CHAPTER XIV.

LIKE A QUICKSAND AND ITS VICTIMS.

JOSEPH and Vashti exchanged an uneasy glance. They had no idea of what was coming, but their fears suggested enough. Perhaps it would prove to be the truth; perhaps an utter fabrication. They believed Outerbridge to be merciless enough to envelop them in any lie.

Peggy pressed Vashti's hand reassuringly, and gave Joseph a glance of the same order. The firmness of the young man aroused Peggy's admiration. In this emergency he had thrown off all signs of mental or physical weakness, and was showing himself a man of mettle.

Uncle Honest read as follows:

"To the Sheriff of Hornets' Nest:—"

"You are hereby requested to diligently watch for one Gunnison Alf and his female partner, Firefly Nell. They are wanted here to answer for bank robbery and murder, the last crime being of a particularly atrocious nature. One thousand dollars reward is offered for their capture. They are believed to have gone further west over the Central Pacific road, and, it is thought, will move north through Idaho. If found, please hold and notify us. Release no suspected persons, even if you have to hold them a month."

Description of criminals:

"Gunnison Alf is twenty-five or thirty years old; medium height; not heavy, but muscularly built; has the general air of a gentleman; dresses in a genteel manner; hair, brown; eyes, gray; hands unmarked by toil. Is a skillful card-player and sharper."

"Firefly Nell is twenty, or more, years old. Born in the East, she has the education and manners of a lady. Is tall, rather slender, finely formed and graceful. Usually dresses expensively, but in good taste. Her hair is brown, but darker than Gunnison Alf's; her eyes are gray, large and brilliant, and her hands slender, soft, white and beautiful."

"Both are of the sort who win confidence by their arts. If seen, notify me. Law and safety demand their prompt arrest."

"PATRICK SHAW,

"Sheriff of Top-Notch, Col."

The voice of the reader died, but the big miner was ready to do his work, as reckless as the majority of men are at all crises.

"That's them!" he pronounced, loudly; "the description fits like a glove."

"It certainly did 'fit,' as far as the personal description went, and Peggy experienced a falling of spirits. She looked at Joseph and Vashti, and their dismayed expression took away what courage she had left. Innocent or guilty, they were alarmed by the accusation."

"You have heard," solemnly resumed Eliakim. "That message I received some days since, but deemed it prudent to keep it secret until now. Do you wonder that I suspected this couple from the first? Do you wonder that I have arrested them?"

A deep, unanimous "No!" broke from the docile crowd, and the Ormes saw how terribly fate was against them—fate and Uncle Honest.

The latter turned to them again.

"For the last time, have you an explanation to make?" he asked.

"No!" firmly replied Joseph.

"Do you admit that you are Gunnison Alf and Firefly Nell?"

"We deny it emphatically. We never heard of the persons named until you read that paper."

"Time will prove. You will be held prisoner here until the Sheriff of Top-Notch can get to our town."

"How long will that be?"

"A month, perhaps."

"But it is very necessary that I should resume my journey—"

"No doubt!" dryly interrupted Uncle Honest.

"Gentlemen," exclaimed the prisoner, moved once more to effort, "I declare to you that you are wrong. I never before heard of the parties you have named, and I am not a fugitive from justice. Neither is my sister. We are innocent of all wrong-doing, and I beg that you will show mercy. I am willing to pay you—"

"What!" cried Uncle Honest, "does he offer to bribe us? Oh! infamous act! Oh! depth of woe!"

There was an angry shout from the crowd, and they declared their detestation of any one who was base enough to suppose that honest Eliakim Outerbridge would accept a bribe.

"Throw them into the dungeon!" shouted Isaac, angrily.

The slender form of venerable Cyrus Graham arose near the platform. He had entered the room, and had listened with anxiety and growing consternation. He had been about the only silent person present, but, though well aware that he was inviting danger, he felt that he must speak now.

"Mr. Outerbridge, can I ask a favor?" he inquired.

"We will hear you," was the unpromising reply.

"One of the prisoners is a lady, and the other is a man suffering from severe injury. The doctor has ordered that he keep his bed and receive all possible care for some days, adding that if this is not done, permanent injury will be the result."

"I believe Orme's injury is only a pretense," interrupted Uncle Honest.

"Then why did you send a litter to bring him here?"

Eliakim started and stared blankly at the speaker for a moment; then a flush appeared in his face. The retort had been the most accurate of shots, while the boldness of it almost took Outerbridge's breath away. The sending of the litter and his own words could not possibly be made to agree, and the Peacemaker then and there conceived a violent hatred for the man who had exposed him.

"I do not think my course needs to be explained," he weakly replied.

"We will let that pass. The favor I want to ask is this: Doctor Hartley, a capable man, says that Orme is injured and suffering. If you will parole him into my hands, and allow him to be doctored at my home, I will be responsible for his presence when wanted."

Uncle Honest's eyes glittered.

"You have betrayed yourself, sir," he said, with more venom than a peacemaker ought to have shown; "I understand now why you interfere. You claim that you never saw Orme until yesterday. Would you make yourself responsible for an utter stranger? Assuredly not! It is plain that you know all about Orme; that he, fleeing from justice, came here to find a sure

refuge with you; that his asserted injury is only a cunning scheme to ward off suspicion and investigation; and that you and Orme are birds of like feather. I accuse you of being his accomplice!"

Graham stood dumfounded. He had interfered out of pure kindness, and he was too aged a man to bravely bear the unjust accusation brought against him.

An angry murmur arose from the crowd, and Graham knew that his career at Hornets' Nest was drawing to a disastrous, if not tragic, end.

The ban of the Leather-Jacket League was upon him.

Uncle Honest knew that he had the game all in his own hands. The roar of the crowd showed that they were with him; their angry looks revealed the force of their resentment against Graham; and the Peacemaker had only to direct the storm.

"I think, valued fellow-citizens!" he continued, "that we know how to deal with Cyrus Graham. I have always looked upon him with suspicion. When we gave the horse-thief, Blizzard-winged Ben, over to justice, I had suspicions of Graham, but I spared him because of his old age."

"Don't do it ag'in!" roared the big miner.

"Assuredly, I will not; justice must now be done, and punishment shall be swift. I hereby declare all the real-estate of Cyrus Graham forfeited to the town of Hornets' Nest, and the same shall be sold at public auction to the highest bidder, to-morrow at ten o'clock, and the proceeds, as usual, turned into the town treasury."

The last hope drifted away from Graham. He knew the prevailing way at Hornets' Nest; he knew that law and justice gave place to Uncle Honest's peculiar rules; and he saw himself beggared at one stroke.

He was speechless, but it was not so with Peggy.

She sprang to her feet with flashing eyes.

"You coward!—oh! you coward!" she cried, facing Eliakim unwaveringly. "How dare you rob an old man of all he has in the world? Is this your boasted reform? Men of Hornets' Nest, are you so dead to noble feelings that you will allow this outrage to go on?"

The eldest Leather-Jacket caught her arm.

"Be still!" he fiercely ordered.

"Not for you, Isaac Outerbridge."

"I'll find a way to make you."

"Do with me as you will, I shall not stand idle and see you rob my father."

"Your father!" sneered Isaac. "You are not a fit person to talk of a 'father!' Cyrus Graham is not your parent, and the Lord only knows who is."

"What is that to you?" retorted Peggy.

"A good deal, as you shall see. You have carried a high hand in this game. I suppose, like other women, you think the privilege of your sex will allow you to utter all the venom possible, but you shall be shown to the contrary. Citizens, we have here an impudent miss, who has vilely insulted my good, gray-haired father. I say that Cyrus Graham is not her father. Who knows who is, or was?"

A woman arose solemnly to her feet.

"I do!" she affirmed.

"Good! Tell us all, Mrs. Potter."

The woman, who was fat and forty, if not fair, looked at Peggy sharply. Viciousness was expressed in that gaze, but her tongue was under better control just then.

"I am grieved to speak," she said, "but duty must be done. I am a member of the Woman's Consolidated Temperance Union; of the Central Africa Missionary Financial Committee; of the Aunt Betsey Sewing Society; of the Woman's Amalgamated Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Grizzly Bears; and of the Woman's Rights International Liberty League; and as such I should be but poorly doing my duty if I kept silence at such a critical period as this."

Unctuously the long sentence rolled off her tongue. She was about to strike an enemy, and she felt that low triumph which only a groveling mind can feel at such a moment.

"Proceed, dear sister!" blandly directed Eliakim Outerbridge, smiling on the aforesaid "sister."

"That shameless female,"—here Mrs. Potter pointed to Peggy—"is really named Ursula Jeffreys, and she is the daughter of Garrett Jeffreys, the train-wrecker who was hung about a year ago!"

CHAPTER XV.

UNCLE HONESTY IS RUDELY OPPOSED.

It was an hour of triumph for Mrs. Charity Potter. She had hated Peggy, and though her malicious tongue had long before spread the news to all who would listen, it was a great gratification to her to stand there and, as she regarded it, disgrace Peggy in public.

She was robbed of a part of her triumph; Peggy did not grow angry in turn, make a vain denial, nor show signs of grief, dismay and anger.

A denial came, however, and from an unexpected quarter.

"It's a lie!" declared Peter Outerbridge, bluntly, as he handled his revolver nervously.

"Garrett Jeffreys was not hung; he was killed fighting like a man, with knife and revolver against him."

"Perhaps you can deny that he was a train-wrecker?" snapped Mrs. Potter.

"I don't deny it."

"Or that this girl is his daughter?"

"See here, old woman, don't mistake me for a temperance class," rudely directed Peter. "Keep your catechism for your weak-blooded converts."

"My boy!—my dear boy!" remonstrated Uncle Honest, "pray do not let us quarrel. Peace on earth and good will to men should be our motto."

Having preached the doctrine of good will to men, he turned and proceeded to crush a helpless girl.

"Pray, Mrs. Potter, tell us all you know about this lamentable affair," he continued.

"I know enough," declared Mrs. Potter, with righteous indignation. "I hope no one here will accuse me of having known the miserable parties, for I am a Christian woman, and so much as the touch of their hands would be a disgrace to me. But this I do know—Garrett Jeffreys was a train-wrecker and a road-agent, and if he was not hung he ought to have been."

Considering this logic overwhelming, Mrs. Potter looked severely at Peter. She could not forget his blunt comment upon the statement of the honored head of the Woman's Consolidated Temperance Union.

"Even the viper leaves an offspring," resumed the eloquent lady, "and Garrett Jeffreys left one. That is her!"

Pointing at Peggy the speaker tried to make the announcement thrilling, but as it was only a repetition, it was less striking than her grammar.

"Thank Providence," she went on, "I do not know the particulars of that dreadful affair, but it seems that an ignorant hunter called Yank Yellowbird took it upon himself to help the girl, and he brought her here. I presume he would have lied about her if it had been necessary, but with such as the Grahams, it was not; they took in the train-wrecker's daughter as willing as though she had been respectable, and we who walk in righteous paths—we were forced to keep her company!"

Mrs. Potter pursed up her lips, and rolled her eyes upward in an ecstasy of high moral virtue. Probably she was praying that she might be pardoned for breathing the same air breathed by the train-wrecker's daughter.

Once more Cyrus Graham started forward.

"I must and will speak!" he declared. "This attack upon Peggy is utterly base. Is she responsible for what her father did? Yank Yellowbird, the noblest of men, knew what he was about when he took charge of her. He had known her well; she had proved her rare goodness of heart; and when she was left alone in the world, he took her and brought her to me. I have found her a good, kind, obedient girl, and she is all that is noble. I wish I could say as much for every woman."

"Meaning me?" viciously asked Mrs. Potter.

"Meaning you!" said Graham, boldly.

"Sir, I scorn you!"

"Thank heaven!"

"Oh! oh! He grows profane!"

"At least, I do not attack the helpless and innocent."

"Your opinions are of no consequence," icily declared Mrs. Potter. "I refer all to the Central Africa Missionary Financial Committee, or the—"

"Yes, yes, Goodwife Potter," interrupted Uncle Honest, alarmed at the prospect of hearing the ponderous names of all Mrs. Potter's beloved societies again repeated; "we all know your reputation. And we now know this girl's."

He looked severely at the "girl."

Peggy's cheeks were very pink and her eyes very bright. The story of her past did not trouble her, for she had never denied it, but she saw the venomous hatred of Mrs. Potter and the deep plotting of Outerbridge back of it, and she did not intend to be crushed without an effort.

"My decision is as follows," added Uncle Honest. "The Ormes shall be imprisoned and held for trial; Graham's property is confiscated to the town and he is held for trial as an ally of the Ormes; and the girl, Peggy, is given five hours to leave town!"

"What!" Peggy exclaimed.

"You are banished from Hornets' Nest. We will not tolerate such a woman here, and the sooner you go the better. If you are found here at the expiration of five hours the other women will arm themselves with sticks and drive you away!"

There had been a stir in the crowd, but every one was too much interested in the scene on the platform to observe who the two men were who were pushing their way forward.

Eliakim Outerbridge saw nothing, and he heard nothing until a tremendous thump on the floor attracted his attention.

He turned and saw a tall man towering above

the others near at hand, and the tall man stretched out one arm toward Peggy and exclaimed, in a ringing voice:

"The man who lays his hand on that little woman in violence will git a condemn'd sickness—yes, or the woman, too, by hurley!"

Yank Yellowbird! He towered there like an angel of wrath. His mild face had grown stern; his genial mouth was grim and fixed; his eyes blazed righteous indignation; and his countenance was to the disciples of iniquity like a lightning-charged storm-cloud.

It was his ponderous rifle, heavily grounded, that had made the startling "thump," and there he stood, Peggy's champion, prepared to espouse her cause against all the rest of the world, if need be.

There was brief silence—an ominous silence. Yank Yellowbird was known there only by sight, but he was well known by reputation. If few had spoken with him, all had heard of him often, and his reputation startled the plotters. His history was written on the rugged sides of the mountain defiles; on the dark paths of the forests; on the wide stretches of the prairies; and the lonely regions of the wilderness lakes; and in the grateful hearts of the honest people he had befriended.

Many a villain knew him, too, but, there, knowledge was as dwarfed as the perverse, evil heart of the wrong-doer. Such men hated Yank as much as they feared him.

Uncle Honest and the Leather-Jackets looked hard at the man who had so boldly and rudely interrupted him. His fearless defiance, coupled with his reputation, gave them a sensation which a common man could not have aroused, but the Peacemaker finally remembered that he had nearly all Hornets' Nest at his back, and his courage returned.

"What unseemly brawler is this?" he asked.

"I'm a brawler who means business," calmly replied the mountaineer. "I'm the enemy o' atrocious insex o' all sorts, an' I'm partic'lar p'ison ter egregious snakes. I never brawl without good cause, but when I do brawl thar is a good 'eal o' muskle in it."

"Brawling is not allowed in this court, sir."

"I s'pose you think it a mean thing ter do?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then this is jest the place for it. 'Tis said that birds o' a feather should flock inter the same coop, an' I don't know whar you'll find more egregious rascality ter the squar' inch than hyar. Did I onderstand you ter say Peggy was banished from this town?"

"Yes."

"What for?"

"Because she is a train-wrecker's daughter, and honest people must not be contaminated by being near the girl."

"An' you would drive her out ef she don't go willin'?"

"We shall."

"I'll bet my rifle ag'in' a jack-knife that you won't do anything o' the sort. Peggy is my ward, an' the air o' the mountains is free ter all. The little woman will stay hyar jest as long as she sees fit, an' the man who tries ter drive her away will get his last sickness—yes, by hurley! he'll get thrashed like sixty!"

Once more the tall mountaineer thumped his rifle upon the floor, and those nearest him shrunk away. The rifle, as well as the man, was productive of awe. The Indians had not named Yank in their peculiar fashion for nothing. They called him "Nevermiss," and the name was not to be misinterpreted.

Eliakim Outerbridge was very angry, but for the first time since he ruled Hornets' Nest he found himself disturbed by opposition.

"Law and order must be preserved!" he protested.

"You're right, by mighty!" agreed Nevermiss. "It must, an' it shall, ef I hev ter massacre a few dozen atrocious insex ter do it! I'm an awful sufferer with malignant newrolgy, but the only effeck on my system is ter make me anxious ter fight. When the newrolgy pains get ter snappin' an' warpin' my j'int's mortal bad, my only way ter git rid on't is ter fight."

"I warn you not to make any disturbance here."

"How's that?"

"We will tolerate no fighting here."

"Do you expect me ter see Peggy driven out o' town an' say nothin'?"

"Law and order must be maintained."

"Do with them as you see fit, mister, but don't te'ch Peggy."

"The edict is pronounced."

"The which?"

"The decree—the order."

"An' you say Peggy must go?"

"I do, sir."

"An' I say she shall not go!" declared the mountaineer, with emphasis. "She's a legal citizen o' Hornets' Nest, an' though the Lord knows that ain't no honor, she don't leave until she get's good an' ready. Woe be ter him who molests the little woman!"

Resolutely spoke the veteran, but Uncle Honest felt that the time had come for him to assert his authority. Turning to Isaac, he solemnly said:

"The spirits of evil are at work, and the fair

fame of our beloved town will be ruthlessly despoiled unless we act promptly. In the name of the outraged people, I call upon you to arrest that unseemly brawler!" and he pointed to Yank.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE BARBAROUS MOUNTAINEER.

ISAAC heard the order with pleasure. His savage disposition had been fretting under the check to the Outerbridge authority. It had always been hard for him to act the hypocritical part which Uncle Honest had made the rule of his life. Isaac was bold, imperious and domineering, and it was his way to rule by undisguised force.

He promptly started toward Yank.

The sympathies of the deluded citizens, male and female, were with him. They regarded Yank as a barbarian who had come down from the wild mountains to disturb their peaceful town with lawless deeds, and they were anxious to see him arrested.

The moment of triumph seemed at hand when Sheriff Isaac advanced so boldly.

Straight toward Nevermiss he proceeded, but the mountaineer did not waver in the least.

"Do you want anything hyar?" he asked.

"I want you!" growled Isaac.

"You can't have me."

The sheriff had stretched out one big hand, as though to grasp Nevermiss and have it all over in a moment, but as the latter spoke he suddenly seized Isaac's sleeve. A single twist, quickly and peculiarly executed, and Isaac was tossed over against the platform, which was all that saved him from falling.

"Keep off!" Yank then exclaimed, in a ringing voice. "I ain't here to be arrested, an', by hurley! I won't be arrested. I claim my rights as a free tramper o' the West, an' I'll see that I get 'em. I'm hyar for that purpose."

With a single bound he gained the platform and took position by Peggy's side.

"Whar's the man who wants to arrest me?" he added.

Not a trace of excitement was visible in his manner, and his coolness in such a crisis gave Uncle Honest an uncomfortable feeling. He remembered the many tales told of the mountaineer's prowess, and felt that it would be well to temperize.

Isaac was pushing forward in new rage, but his father stopped him.

"Let us have peace here!" Eliakim directed, his voice trembling slightly. "Far be it from me to wish to shed the blood of this misguided man."

"Never mind my blood!" serenely answered Nevermiss; "I'll look out for that."

"Let me at him!" hissed Isaac, keeping his wrath in bounds only by a powerful effort.

"Be calm, my son, be calm!" implored the Peacemaker. "Let us not stain the fair record of our loved town by one rough act. Rest assured, some way shall be found to protect the people."

This plea did not seem to affect Isaac greatly, but Aaron began whispering to him rapidly.

"Yellowbird," pursued Uncle Honest, "you are making a great mistake."

"How so?"

"You have a very fair reputation, and you are ruining it all by your lawless course."

"Would you have me stan' idle an' see wrong done a harmless woman?"

"Would you have her remain here and corrupt the esteemed sisters of the town?"

"How will she corrupt them?"

"She is a train-wrecker's daughter."

"Is that all you know ag'in' her?"

"Isn't that enough?"

"No, by hurley, it ain't enough. 'Round whar I've been livin' it's common to jedge folks by themselves, not by the record o' their ancestors, an' that's jest what is goin' to be done here. Peggy is goin' ter be jedge by her own acts in this town, an' I onderstand nobody has a word ter say ag'in' her."

Mrs. Charity Potter arose, grim and severe.

"I have something to say," she announced.

"Spit it out, mum; spit it out."

"That girl is a disgrace to Hornets' Nest," affirmed the woman.

"Give particulars, ef you please."

"She has infamously traduced the natives of Central Africa, and when we collected money to buy a gross of Doctor Watts's hymns to send to them, she scoffed in an unfeeling and skeptical way."

Having made this statement the philanthropic lady sat down as though the case was settled and Peggy's guilt abundantly proved.

"This ain't so serious a matter as it might be, mum," answered Nevermiss, his native humor coming to the surface. "The Afrikay folks couldn't wear Watts's hymns fur clothes, an' they'd lay mortal bard on the stummick ef they eat them, so I consait Peggy had some grounds fur her opposition. Anyhow, I sha'n't agree ter havin' her expelled without we summon Doctor Watts as a witness. It's a serious matter ter be expelled. My gran'father's venerable parent, Adam Yellowbird, was driv' out o' the Garden

o' Eden, whar his ancestors had lived fur seven generations, an' the old gentleman never got over the shock."

Uncle Honest let the mountaineer talk without interruption, and, on the whole, he was glad that Yank had assumed a facetious mood.

The Peacemaker was no fool, and he had read the hunter well while they stood there. With a town at his back he might well defy almost any man, whatever his reputation might be, but Uncle Honest had no desire to defy Yank. The man had awakened his fears, and he decided that a fight, even though it ended in his favor would recoil upon himself.

He believed there was a safer way to deal with the veteran. He determined to make a truce, and then strike him unawares. A single knife-stroke when Nevermiss was off his guard would prevent scandal, and, perhaps, save the lives of some of the Leather-Jackets.

With this treacherous scheme in mind he was ready to speak when the mountaineer ceased.

"Mr. Yellowbird," he said, in his blandest manner, "you are very much in the wrong here, but peace and good will have always been the guiding principles of my life. Believing that you mean well, I am willing to overlook your rude interference, and you will not be arrested."

"Bleegeed to ye, by hurley!" quoth Yank, with a twinkle in his gray eyes.

"You are free to go."

"Go whar?"

"Anywhere you see fit."

"What about Peggy?"

"I will extend her time for leaving Hornets' Nest to one week, to please you."

"You're egregious kind, but she won't go then, neither."

"We will talk of that later."

"Thar is likely ter be somethin' said ef the little woman is merlested."

"Sheriff," pursued Uncle Honest, "your only prisoners are the Ormes. Take good care of them."

Peggy looked anxiously at Yank, but he shook his head. He was not less shrewd than Eliakim. The fact that he had won victory on one point did not make him so foolhardy as to suppose that he could rule Hornets' Nest in all things by the solitary power of his arms and wits. He knew where to draw the line, and he drew it at the Ormes. They must for the time submit to imprisonment, but this did not mean that he abandoned them.

Whoever worked for them must work in the dark, for their story was still untold, and it was necessary to have a consultation and decide how far it was advisable to fight their case.

If unswerving devotion was thought right, Nevermiss was fertile with expedients.

He now carried out his part in the programme without any show of interest in the Ormes. He lightly told Peggy to say good-bye for the time to Vashti, at the same time giving her a significant look, and she did not rebel. She, as well as Vashti and Joseph, had come to look upon Yank as their champion and one hope, and they were sensible enough to let the matter rest as he evidently wished.

As soon as he could do so without showing undue haste, the mountaineer got Peggy out of the room. She was followed by many a savage glance, especially on the part of the women, but her guard was increased by the addition of the dog, Moses, to Yank, and the animal looked ready to spring at the throat of any one who molested them.

Cyrus Graham followed, and the party started toward the latter's home.

"I saw Doctor Mark inside," said Peggy, in a low voice.

"He was thar," Yank agreed.

"Is he angry with us, or why didn't he take place by your side?"

"Cause I ordered him not to. He was ready enough, the doctor was; but he'd got strick orders from me. We ain't so powerful that we kin win on muskle, an' we've got ter resort to strategy. We want a friend in the enemy's camp, an' I've given the doctor his orders. He ain't ter show no interest out o' the common in us, but keep right in with the Dirty-Jacket crowd, an' git all the p'int's he can. I'll see him on the sly now an' then, an' ef he an' I can't git up some plan ter beat them atrocious insex, I'm mortally mistook."

"Your plan is, beyond doubt, the best. In this case, at least, strategy is better than open resistance."

"It's a good thing at any time, an' it runs in the Yellowbird fam'ly, docs strategy. My gran'father, the Revolutionary relict, was great on the tick-tacks o' war, an' he could kill off more o' the enemy by his plans than any other gin'ral ever killed in battle. He'd draw up a paper, my gran'father would, with a full list o' the dead an' wounded, an' I must say the slaughter was great. It's a pity his battles could never be fit in reality, for he had the tick-tacks down so fine he'd soon hev depoperlated the enemy."

Talking genially the mountaineer escorted Peggy home, but nothing could raise her spirits. The Ormes were in the hands of the Leather-

Jackets, and flight was now out of the question.

The latest calamities had only served to strengthen Peggy's attachment to them, and, knowing how hard it was to defeat the ruling powers of Hornets' Nest, she was greatly worried.

She did not for a moment believe the insinuation that they were "Gunnison Alf" and "Firefly Nell," and her loyalty to them had suffered no diminution. The same could not be said of her confidence. The rule of the Outerbridges was absolute, and she saw no way to save victims upon whom they had once set the seal of their displeasure.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE STOUT HEART OF THE LEADER.

CYRUS GRAHAM came in with the most downcast expression imaginable, and dropped heavily into a chair.

"You seem melancholy, neighbor," observed Yank, kindly.

"I have cause to be," Graham almost groaned.

"The atrocious insex have cut up rough."

"Did you hear them forfeit my property to the town?"

"To be sure, but, land o' Goshen! that act won't hold water. No law on the face o' this handful o' earth will allow it."

"The laws of the Outerbridges will, and that is the only law known here. We are, as you must know, far from real law and officers thereof, and we are ruled absolutely by Eliakim Outerbridge and his sons. They make such laws as they see fit, and they are enforced here."

"An' do you reelly mean ter say they can confiscate yer property an' make it work?"

"One of the laws made by Outerbridge," explained Graham, in a helpless way, "is that when a person is found guilty of crime he shall forfeit all his worldly possessions; that the same shall be sold at public auction to the highest bidder, and the proceeds be turned into the treasury of the town. Eliakim, himself, is treasurer, and you can imagine what becomes of the money."

"Land o' Goshen! you don't say that the people submit to any such rule as that?" asked the mountaineer, in astonishment.

"I do."

"Wal, by hurley! they must like ter be robbed."

"You don't know Outerbridge's cunning. He never confiscates anybody's property without first turning all the citizens against him, and then all are eager for the sacrifice. The people here are made up of fools and villains, and all adore Outerbridge. When a confiscation is made they naturally suppose their treasury is enriched, which is why nobody but the victim ever objects, but I'll bet something that 'Uncle Honest'—was there ever a worse misnomer?—finds some way to appropriate all of the forfeited property, or, rather, the more convenient cash into which it is turned."

"Strikes me Eliakim has a monopoly hyar!"

"A vast, grinding, inhuman monopoly!" Graham bitterly exclaimed.

"I'm glad I've visited Hornets' Nest," declared Yank, with a nod.

"I wish I had never seen the accursed place."

"That's nat'ral."

"This blow ruins me. Every cent I have in the world—the savings of many years—is swept away at one cruel blow."

"You don't mean that you intend ter give it up?" exclaimed Nevermiss, in surprise.

"What else can I do?"

"Do! Why, you kin fight like hurley."

"Against such odds?"

"Why, sartain."

"Ah! friend Yellowbird, you don't know this town!"

"I'm gettin' acquainted fast," the mountaineer dryly replied.

"Should I resist the persecution, it would end by my corpse being found some morning in a lonely gulch—or, perhaps, I should disappear forever from view."

"Done by the Outerbridges?"

"Yes."

"Ef that is the fate o' all who oppose the Outerbridges I stan' a poor chance, fur I am goin' to fight 'em hip an' thigh, an' my animal form would kick up the wu'st kind o' a row ef it was left layin' round loose in a gulch. All the Yellowbirds hev been properly buried except one, an' he was blowed up in a powder-mill. They did the best for him they could, an' harrered in the ground fur three mile around."

"I am afraid you under-estimate the Outerbridges."

"I think them condemn'd mean skunks."

"They are also villains."

"I don't doubt it an' artom, an' that is why I feel so sure o' gettin' the best on 'em. Ask Border Bullet, or Kansas Kitten, or Gold Gauntlet—all friends o' mine who hev helped me fight atrocious insex fore now. They ain't 'round hyar now, but you may run ag'in 'em some time. Peggy, what's the matter with Mrs. Cheeky Hopper, or whatever her name is?"

"Charity Potter. Well, she hates me. You

see, when you first brought me here she tried to enlist me under her banner, and get all the money she could from me. She is a woman who is connected with a dozen so-called charitable societies, while, at home, she scolds and rails continually at her husband, a poor, weak little man; and her own children go half-naked and half-starved. But Mrs. Potter is the great woman of the town. She is an officer in almost every society known to the world—one devoted to the heathen of Central Africa; another to temperance; another to women's rights; and so on through the list."

"I've heerd o' sech women afore," replied Yank; "ev'ry town has one or more, though some on 'em ain't so mortal bad as others. The two wu'st kinds o' cranks out is the man who goes inter politics, an' the woman who b'longs ter societies. They both desert the substance fur the shadder, an' make thei'selves egregious ridic'lous. They ought ter be put in a crazy-house, by hurley! though it would be tough on the other inmates."

"My Aunt Hebsibah Lily Yellowbird was summut interested in Central Afrikay, an' she come ter see me one day about it. She wanted me ter add to the aid fund."

"I ain't got a dollar ter my name," sez I.

"You hev clothes," sez she.

"Only an egregious few," sez I.

"Thar's yer old bufl'er coat," sez she.

"I'm afeerd it wouldn't fit the Afrikay climate," sez I, "an', besides, I was thinkin' o' givin' it to old Tom Weeks, in our village."

"Let Tom Weeks work an' clothe hisself," sez my aunt, with some ha'shness o' v'ice an' manner.

"He's got the roomatiz like hurley," sez I.

"It's nothin' but laziness," sez she.

"Do the Central Afrikay chaps work?" sez I.

"They do, 'cordin' ter their light," sez she.

"Butchers, ain't they?" sez I.

"Some on 'em may be," sez she.

"Jes' so," sez I, "I've heerd they eat one another."

"It's an egregious lie!" sez my aunt, gittin' pale around her ears.

"That settles it," sez I; "bein' as you are so wal acquainted with 'em, you must know. Pritty good fellers, be they? Why don't ye bring over some on 'em, an' take 'em ter board? Then you'd have a chance ter practize benev'lence outer 'em all ye wanted to."

"Boys should not be too forrud with their suggestions," sez my aunt, frownin'. "Now you go an' git what you can, nephew, an' bring ter me. Pity the suff'rin' Africans!" sez she, waggin' her head pathetic, an' rollin' up her eyes.

"I started ter my room, but on the way it struck me 'twas odd that my aunt's society let poor old Susan Jones almost starve in the village, while they was hustlin' ter git things fur the Africans. That may hev warped my benev'lence, fur my c'lection in my room wa'n't large. When I come back I sez ter my aunt:

"I've decided ter give Tom Weeks the coat, but hyer is these fur the Central Afrikay chaps. No thanks; take 'em," sez I. "'Tis an egregious pile more blessed ter give than ter receive," sez I; an' with that I laid a walkin'-cane an' a pair o' suspenders in my aunt's lap.

"I never jestly knowed what the trouble was, but, fur some reason, my aunt was real put out. She hove the cane at my head an' sailed out o' the house like a blizzard, and she didn't speak ter me ag'in fur six months. She did wrong, for it dried up my benev'lence, an' I ain't gi'n nothin' to the Africans sence, though I'd be glad ter send 'em a pair o' suspenders now an' then ef I thought they reelly needed 'em."

Yank assumed an air and look of benevolence in keeping with his assertion, and his manner encouraged the others in spite of themselves. His good humor was too contagious to be put down by any adversity.

Conversation wandered to the Ormes, and Yank explained his movements during the forenoon. The peculiar conduct of Storm Rider, the aeronaut, had attracted his attention, and, desirous of learning more about him, he had sought Doctor Hartley.

The latter had described his interview with that person in full, and he and Yank had agreed that as the Ormes would not help save themselves by telling their story, it would be not only wise but justifiable to endeavor to get the story from the Sky Navigator.

But where was he?

This Doctor Mark could not tell, but he was of the opinion that Storm Rider was somewhere in the hills; indeed, he could be nowhere else, unless he had left the vicinity entirely. Acting upon this theory the two men had set off to find the aeronaut, and all the forenoon had been devoted to the search.

It was useless; Storm Rider was not found.

When they returned they learned the important and startling events that had occurred while they were away. Doctor Mark was indignant, and wished to face the crowd with Yank, but the latter had a plan of his own. The doctor was not as yet identified as a strong partisan of the Ormes, and it was best that he should not be—he could do more good by maintaining amicable relations with Uncle Honest, and leavin' all he could in that quarter.

Hartley reluctantly gave way, though Yank expressed the opinion that he had found it hard to keep his indignation in check during the scene in the court-room.

"Now let us look this egregious case in the face," said Yank, in conclusion. "We're wadin' in tribulation an' distress so deep that I'm mortal afeerd we'll git in over our boots, but one thing is certain—we ain't goin' ter yield a p'int ter the inemy. The Yellowbirds never would allow thei'selves ter be downed, an' I'll hold up the honor o' the fam'ly pedigree in spite o' newrolgy an' other distempers."

"In plain words, neighbors, we're goin' ter fight like hurley. We won't allow Peggy ter be driv' out o' town; we won't let your goods, chattels an' other notions be confiscated, Graham; an' we're goin' ter rescue the Ormes. These things we're bound ter do, but the question is, how in hurley be we ter do them?"

Nevermiss looked at his companions as though he thought each one had an answer ready, but there was no reply. He had asked a hard question. How were these things to be done? How, indeed, when a whole town was leagued against them?

CHAPTER XVIII.

KNIFE BELT GROWS MYSTERIOUS.

THERE was a sound of vigorous hammering in the court-room of the City Hall. The increase in the number of prisoners made some kind of change necessary. Knifebelt, the boy aeronaut, occupied the only room previously used as a prison, but Joseph and Vashti had now to be provided for, and Uncle Honest had given directions in regard to new rooms.

The hammering was done by carpenters who were carrying out his orders.

The rooms which were being made would have resisted the efforts of a determined prisoner but little if he had been left alone, but Isaac intended to remain there with two or three men.

Uncle Honest had gone to his house, but the Leather-Jackets remained in the court-room. Isaac superintended the changes which were being made.

Aaron and Peter took no active part. They stood apart and watched in silence. Isaac was too busy to notice them particularly. Had he done so he would have been impressed by their appearance, for both were sullen and scowling. They had lost all heart for the pursuits once so pleasant to them, and trouble might yet occur in the Leather-Jacket League.

This fact promised nothing for the prisoners. Their misfortunes had not stirred the pity of the dissatisfied men, and if Aaron could have had his way, Vashti's captivity would have assumed a worse form. The walls of the City Hall prison were better than those of Aaron's house; a state of captivity better than the doubtful honor of being Aaron's wife.

Peter was angry because Peggy had been dragged into the trouble, and was not less sulky than Aaron, but on this occasion, at least, there was no confidential talk between the young men.

The necessary changes were made before night, and separate rooms provided for Joseph and Vashti. They were side by side, and a connecting door had been left. Vashti's adjoined that of Knifebelt, but a solid wall interposed a barrier to eye and ear.

Before the work was done Aaron and Peter had wandered away. Isaac did not heed this, but selected two men and prepared to pass the night in the building. His assistants, who were named Eph Hickman and Josh Webb, were fellows upon whom he could rely fully. They were too lazy to be active villains, but unfeeling enough to obey the Outerbridges in all things as long as they could live without manual labor.

Darkness fell. Supper was brought for prisoners and guards, and the evening wore on. Isaac was wide awake and alert. He did not see any way by which the prisoners could escape, but he made frequent journeys to make sure that all was right.

He saw nothing suspicious. Joseph and Vashti, who were availing themselves of the chance to pass the evening together, seemed without hope, and Knifebelt lay curled up more like an animal than a boy—his favorite position since his incarceration.

Isaac's disgust was aroused later by the arrival of enough blankets and other articles to make comfortable couches for the latest prisoners. Harsh as ever, he would have compelled them to sleep with one blanket each, but it was the will of Uncle Honest that it should be otherwise.

The Leather-Jacket, as usual, bowed to his father's will; but it annoyed him, and his dark face was more stern and morose than ever as he went his rounds.

His mode of gaining view of Knifebelt was to push aside a panel which was over a little opening eighteen inches square. Through this the food of former prisoners had been passed, and the door never opened except when they were to go in or come out.

On this evening the time passed on until Joseph and Vashti separated for the night, and

went to their couches. Knifebelt still lay curled up, animal-like, and the necessity for vigilance seemed past, but the sheriff did not change his manner.

He allowed Hickman and Webb to smoke and play cards, but he did neither. Keeping apart from them, he sat with contracted brows, gazing at vacancy.

What was in the grim Leather-Jacket's mind, no other person could surmise. He was ambitious enough to harbor hopes of a veritable surprise in the West, but Hornets' Nest would have been a poor place in which to start it.

Nobody understood Isaac fully; he was unreadable, and, like a wise man, he told no more than others could see.

Hickman and Webb tired of playing cards, and, assuming easy positions, smoked in silence. Isaac arose to make his rounds again. All was still in Vashti's room, and Joseph seemed to be sleeping peacefully. The sheriff went on to Knifebelt's room.

He slid back the panel and looked inside.

The light on the table shone freely in the room and revealed the boy, but he was no longer curled up in the corner. He was on his feet, and, standing perfectly still, was staring at the further wall fixedly. His face was set and stony, and the imperfect view which Isaac had of his eyes showed them much like his face.

Isaac's first feeling was one of surprise, and he stood still and looked at the boy. Knifebelt did not stir. Still he stared at the wall, and his course grew increasingly singular. Isaac wondered if he was not in a somnambulistic state, but the sheriff's natural suspicions caused him to gain another idea.

Was treason at work around the City Hall?

Quietly he slid the panel back until the opening was almost closed. Then he watched secretly.

Seconds rolled on to minutes, but not a limb did Knifebelt stir. His fixed, strained position, and his stony expression, gave Isaac an uncomfortable feeling. The boy had strange ways at all times—perhaps he was going mad!

The sheriff, too, looked hard at the wall, but he could see nothing unusual; he listened, but he could hear nothing unusual. He had about decided to enter and question the prisoner, when the latter suddenly started and moved forward to the wall. Then he placed one ear close to the partition, and his face, turned toward Isaac, bore an eager expression.

Deeper grew the Leather-Jacket's scowl. His prisoner was not mad; he was not the victim of a dream; but treachery was on foot in Hornets' Nest.

Knifebelt was not doing his listening for nothing.

Quickly Isaac returned to his men.

"Rouse up, you fools!" he imperiously directed.

They did rouse with remarkable quickness; the order was peremptory even for the grim sheriff.

"Drop those pipes, and become human beings!"

The pipes were hastily put away.

"Now give attention to me! There is mischief afoot. Some sort of treachery is afoot; what it is I don't know yet. I think there is a scheme to rescue our prisoners."

"It's that thar lunk Yank Yellowbird!" declared Hickman, with confidence.

"Bet yer life!" coincided Webb.

"Whoever it is will get hurt. Webb, I want you to go to the panel. It is open half an inch. Stand by it and watch the boy, but don't let him see or hear you. If you do I'll break your head! Understand?"

"I do, fur sure."

"You can come with me, Hickman. We'll go outside and make a circuit of the place."

"What ef the enemy makes a dash fur me?" inquired, Webb.

"Shoot whoever tries it!"

"With great pleasure."

"But if there is only one man, capture him alive if you can. I want him."

"You kin depend on me, sheriff."

"Away to your post, then. Hickman, follow me!"

Out into the darkness marched the sheriff, and Eph followed at his heels.

"Now," continued Isaac, "get your revolver ready. There may be no need of using it, but don't spare powder if there is. I'll go one way and you the other, and we'll meet at the rear. We must capture whosoever we find, quietly, if possible; with a bullet if need be. Possibly the intruders are in the store-room. If the coast is clear when we meet, don't speak above a whisper. If any one is inside, we don't mean to let him know we are on the track."

"All right, Cap."

Hickman answered indifferently; he did not believe any force to be gathered near there could worry them seriously.

Isaac gave a few more directions and then they separated. The big leader moved around the west side of the house. His revolver was held ready for use, and his keen eyes left no spot unnoticed as he crept forward. At the least he expected to find a guard on duty, working for the men he believed was endeavoring to liberate

the prisoners, and the guard bade likely to fare hard.

The sheriff would not hesitate to shoot him off-hand, and he knew that Hornets' Nest would uphold him.

"I hope it's Yank Yellowbird!" he muttered, retaining a vivid recollection and hatred for the man who had so roughly flung him against the platform in the court-room.

Nothing was to be seen up to the time when he reached the corner, but there he thought developments certain. He peered around cautiously, but eagerly, looking for a victim, but none could he see.

The darkness was pronounced at that point, but it soon became certain that no enemy was there.

A moment later and Eph Hickman's head was thrust around the opposite corner. One point was settled, and Isaac made a motion to his ally and walked out boldly. Eph came to him.

Any one less pertinacious than the Leather-Jacket would have abandoned his suspicion, but he did nothing of the kind. There was a window in the end of the building, and he decided that the prowler had entered there and closed it after him.

The sheriff spoke in a low voice:

"Eph, stand near that window and be prepared to seize the scoundrel if he gets out."

"All right," replied Eph, with Spartan brevity.

"He's in there, and I'll go for him from the inside."

"Just as you say."

"Mind now—he's to be taken alive if possible; if not, shoot him down without mercy."

"All right."

CHAPTER XIX.

UNCLE HONEST TRIES HIS HAND.

EPH remained as phlegmatic as ever; he was willing to slay or to spare, as circumstances required, and was indifferent as to the course of events.

Isaac returned to the hall. Fixed in the idea which had taken hold of him he was determined to invade the store-room at once. He only waited to take another look at Knifebelt. The boy was standing near the wall, but was no longer in a listening attitude. If Isaac correctly read the expression on his face, the boy was uncertain.

The sheriff took the lamp in his left hand, and with a revolver in his right, prepared to invade the store-room.

He flung the door open and entered.

The room was filled with rubbish, and when he first swept a glance around he could see no human being. As he stood there he was exposed to a shot from any lurking enemy, but the fact did not trouble him.

If his belief had wavered, there was soon reason to renew it—the wall next to Knifebelt's room had been tampered with, and a board was partially torn away.

Grimly the Leather-Jacket went on, and he was not long in making discoveries. Up started a man from the cover of a box, and with a headlong rush he made for the window. It was clearly his intention to leap out through sash and all, but there was a check to his proceedings. Isaac, too, made a rush, and in a moment his grasp was upon the intruder.

Stopped in the moment of decisive action the latter turned and grappled with his enemy, but it was an unequal battle, soon over. Isaac had hurriedly set the lamp on a box, and his strength proved so far superior to the other's that the struggle was only a farce.

The unknown was held as in a vise, and his efforts were so useless that he speedily yielded.

Isaac looked at his prisoner in grim silence. The man was a stranger to him. Had Doctor Mark been there he would easily have recognized Storm Rider, the Sky Navigator, but Isaac saw only a tall, slender man of twice his own years, who stood in dismay, if not in actual terror.

"Well, here we are!" observed Isaac, stolidly.

Storm Rider did not answer.

"What are you doing here?" pursued the sheriff.

"Nothing."

"Well, I'm doing something, if you ain't. Who the blazes are you?"

"No matter," muttered the aeronaut.

Isaac shook him roughly.

"It matters to me, and I don't take such an answer. So you are a thief, eh?"

The prisoner seemed on the point of speaking; then he checked himself, hesitated, and finally replied.

"Yes."

"What do you want to steal?"

"Food—something to eat."

"Did you expect to find it here?"

"Yes."

"You lie, and we both know it. Nobody would come in here to get food. You were trying to get at the prisoners. What did you want with them?"

"Nothing. I know nothing about any prisoners. I was hungry—starving—and I was after food at any price. I thought this was a store."

Storm Rider held his head well up and talked

briskly. As Isaac had asserted the man was speaking falsely, but, receiving the hint from the sheriff's own words, he had resolved to avow himself a thief to escape more serious charges.

A cold sneer appeared on Isaac's face.

"You talk well, but it won't do. Your story is altogether too foolish. Come, you may as well make a plain confession right at the start. What is your name?"

"Nathan Moss."

"Oh! it is, eh?"

"Yes."

The sheriff's brows were bent in a most ominous scowl. He had the will to lay violent hands upon the prisoner and choke his secret out of him, but even then the precepts of Uncle Honest ruled the big son. He kept the peace with an effort.

"You may as well tell the whole truth, for I am bound to have it out of you. You are fooling with a man who may be dangerous to you. Here at Hornets' Nest we allow no such folly as this. The peace and order of the town must and shall be preserved, and all ruffians like you will get hard usage unless they are sensible enough to deserve pity. Will you own up?"

"I have nothing to tell more than I have already confessed to you."

"We'll see!"

Taking firm hold on the man's arm, Isaac hustled him out of the room. He had decided to take the captive to Uncle Honest at once. The sheriff was conscious that he was not an expert at persuasion, but he considered his father very near invincible. Uncle Honest had a way of worming men's secrets from them which was a wonder to his admiring offspring.

Getting Hickman and Webb together, Isaac gave them directions. For the time being the City Hall was left in their charge, and they were expected to use all possible care and alertness. They promised, and then their leader took his prisoner away.

Storm Rider had recovered his outward composure to a great degree, but there had been nothing to quiet his real fears. He knew he was in a bad situation, and the prospect alarmed him. As they went along he made an appeal to Isaac, but the latter did not answer a word. In utter silence he marched the unhappy aeronaut to the Unterbridge residence.

The hour was late, but Uncle Honest had not retired. His lamp was burning low, but he did not heed it. He sat in a chair in deep thought, looking toward the floor without being conscious that he saw anything.

A knock sounded at the door.

"It is Isaac!" he said aloud, and then bade the applicant enter.

The door opened, and the sheriff and his companion entered. The feeble light fell upon them, but imperfectly, and Eliakim shaded his eyes and looked inquiringly at the Sky Navigator.

"I have brought a visitor," observed Isaac grimly.

"I don't seem to know him, my son."

"Nor I."

"If his business is not important—"

"He has none; he has come on my business. He is a prisoner."

"Ah!"

"He tried to break into the City Hall and rescue the prisoners confined therein—"

"I deny it!" exclaimed Storm Rider. "I assure you that I am innocent."

"So was Judas!" scoffed the sheriff.

"I was hungry and—"

"Father," interrupted Isaac, "I give the man to you. He is an unconscionable liar, as you shall hear."

He briefly described the capture of the aeronaut.

By the time he had finished, Eliakim was ready for work. He did not know the man before him, but it was plain that he was an enemy. Uncle Honest knew how to deal with such persons. He pointed to a chair.

"Sit down!" he coldly directed.

The order was obeyed.

"Now we will be comfortable," continued the Peacemaker, resuming his usual manner. "Pray, my dear sir, what is your name?"

"Nathan Moss."

"Why did you come to Hornets' Nest?"

"I am a hunter. I had hard luck in the mountains, and lost my rifle and ammunition. I was about starved when I struck here, and I obeyed the law of self-preservation when I tried to get food."

"Your situation was pitiful," agreed Eliakim, blandly. "Did the people refuse to give you food?"

Storm Rider hesitated.

"The hour was so late that I did not ask."

"Your consideration for their convenience was truly admirable. Considering that you were starving, you did yourself honor."

"I fear you do not believe me."

"Frankly, my dear friend, I do not. Do you know the reason?"

"I suppose it is my usual ill luck."

"No; it is because you are too well known to me. Isaac, my son, this is the balloonist who is known as Storm Rider!"

Both the listeners started. The sheriff wondered that he had not suspected the truth before, when he had the clear description of

Knifebelt to aid him; and the aeronaut felt new dismay at finding his identity known.

"You will see, my dear sir," Eliakim went on, "how useless it is to adhere to the story you have told. You are a friend of the Ormes, and of Knifebelt, and you were trying to rescue them when you were caught. Quite natural in you, but you must pardon me if I take a logical view of it. You invited the wrath of the law, sir, when you made your rash move to-night."

This announcement did not seem to affect the prisoner very much. Possibly there were things he feared more than the law.

Uncle Honest settled down to his work grimly. He had failed to get a confession from the Ormes, but here was a man reputed to know their secrets, and the Peacemaker was determined to frighten him into telling everything.

"My son, turn the light up higher," Eliakim added.

Isaac obeyed, and his father resumed ponderously:

"I regret the necessity of severity, sir, but we represent the majesty of the law here, and we cannot neglect our duty. The divine rights of the people are in our charge—the honor of the town where we try to maintain all that is good and noble—and we cannot falter in our trust. Wickedness must not flourish in these sacred regions. Vice is a hydra-headed reptile we aspire to crush under foot, and the people—"

Uncle Honest suddenly paused. He had been proceeding in a sonorous tone when he became suddenly aware that Storm Rider's manner had changed. The aeronaut had half-started from the chair, and a look of wonder and dismay was on his face.

Some abrupt, remarkable change had come over him, making him oblivious to what had lately occupied his mind entirely, and he was staring at Uncle Honest as though a ghost had appeared to his startled vision.

CHAPTER XX.

WHAT WILL THE NIGHT BRING FORTH?

"WELL!" exclaimed Eliakim, with unusual curtness, "what is the matter with you now?"

Still Storm Rider looked in silence.

"The fool is crazy—or pretending to be!" replied Isaac, impatiently. "You'd better handle him without gloves."

"There is method in his madness, whatever he is at. He knew enough to help the Ormes well."

"The voice!" exclaimed the aeronaut; "the voice and the face!"

"What nonsense are you talking now?"

"It is he—it is he!" muttered Storm Rider, like one in a trance.

Isaac advanced with impatient haste. His broad hand closed over the Sky Navigator's shoulder with almost crushing force.

"You gibbering idiot!" he shouted, "what do you mean?"

His roughness aroused the prisoner as from a nightmare. Despite the force of the big sheriff's grasp, he sprung to his feet.

"Great heavens!" he ejaculated, "it is David Marron!"

He staggered back as he spoke, and the sheriff roughly forced him back into the chair.

"The fellow is playing 'possum!" he asserted.

"The best thing we can do is to get a whip and lace his hide well."

There was no reply, and Isaac turned to his sire. A noticeable change had taken place in the venerable Peacemaker. His calm, benevolent air had vanished, and a grayish pallor was observable in his cheeks. He was looking at Storm Rider as fixedly as the latter had lately looked at him, and the general similarity in their manner was noticed by the sheriff with some apprehension.

"Are you sick, father?" he asked.

The elder man put out one hand with an uncertain gesture.

"The—whisky!" he muttered.

Isaac brought it quickly, and Uncle Honest drained the large portion offered him. His usually steady hand shook as he did so, but the liquor had not been appealed to in vain. It sent the blood coursing through his veins with new vigor.

The sight of his manifest agitation produced an opposite effect upon Storm Rider. He smiled, and though there was little real mirth in it, the fact was plain that he enjoyed the emotion of the Peacemaker.

"I see you now know me," he said, after a pause.

"I do not!"

Both men spoke huskily, and the sheriff watched in irresolute wonder. Wholly at a loss to understand their motives, and their relations to one another, he was unable to take part intelligently.

"I know you, at any rate," returned the aeronaut, with increasing strength.

"What do you mean?"

"Whatever you may be called here, your real name is David Marron."

"Thank you—I should never have suspected the fact had you not told me. David Marron! I never heard the name until to-night."

"You were known by it during the first

thirty years of your life; how much longer I can't say."

"Then you must have known me?"

"I did."

"What is your name?"

"Didn't I tell you it was Nathan Moss?"

"You did. It was one of your lies?"

"At least, I don't need to ask yours."

"You insist that it is—what did you say?"

"David Marron."

"You labor under a mistake. I am not the man you take me to be, and as I am not given to joking I prefer that you drop the assertion. Do you understand?"

Uncle Honest was fast recovering from his strange agitation. It was not in his nature to be long cast down; indeed, Isaac had never before seen him moved as he had been that evening. And as the Peacemaker recovered his composure his other natural characteristics came back, and his tone and expression alike warned Storm Rider that danger was menacing him. He was not indifferent to it, but he would not retreat. His stand was taken, and he would abide by it.

He believed that if he had one hope left it lay in holding his own bravely, and working on Uncle Honest's fears. How small that hope was he was destined to learn to his sorrow.

To the last question he steadily answered:

"I do understand, and that is just why I refuse to be hoodwinked. I know very well what I am talking about—I know you are David Marron."

"Man, you lie!" the Peacemaker exclaimed.

"Excuse me; I did not think to annoy you," pursued the aeronaut; "but it seemed to me that I ought to have the consideration due an old friend."

"One who won't tell his name!"

"I have my reasons."

"Too well-known to State's-prison officials, perhaps."

"What one of us has a clear record?"

"I have not the vanity to make extravagant claims," answered Uncle Honest, with a partial return of his old manner, "but I will refer you to my reputation in this town."

Storm Rider smiled sarcastically.

"It is not necessary," he observed.

Eliakim relapsed into silence, but his gaze did not leave the aeronaut's face. There was a faint resemblance there to some one he had known in the past, but who it was he could not tell. The Sky Navigator had him at a disadvantage, but one thing was very evident—Storm Rider was a dangerous man.

If he had fully known the prevailing way in the town he would have had grave doubts of his ability to ever tell any one else that Uncle Honest and David Marron were one.

Storm Rider was figuratively in the tiger's den.

Isaac Outerbridge was growing restless. No advance was being made with the prisoner—on the contrary, they were getting deeper than ever in perplexity—and the affairs at City Hall might need attention.

"Father," he said, somewhat brusquely, "do you wish to prolong this interview?"

"I do not."

"Then let me take this man back to the City Hall."

"I think we will keep him here to-night."

"Here?"

"Yes. There is no spare room at the City Hall, while here there is plenty."

"But I do not like to leave you such a dangerous companion for the night."

"He is not dangerous. Aaron and Peter are in the house, and, besides, I have handcuffs here. We will put them on him, and tie him to the bed in the east room."

A look of actual alarm appeared on Storm Rider's face.

"I protest against that!" he exclaimed.

"Get the handcuffs, my son," Uncle Honest calmly directed.

"I will not submit!" the aeronaut declared.

He started to his feet and made one step toward the door, but there he was checked. Isaac's hand was laid forcibly upon him, and he was pushed back into the chair. He did not give up even then, for the idea of being left in the house with Eliakim had frightened him greatly, but his strength availed nothing against that of the sheriff. Uncle Honest brought forward the handcuffs, and he was soon reduced to a helpless state.

The Outerbridges lost no time in carrying out their plan. Isaac was satisfied that his father knew what he was about, and he obeyed with unquestioning readiness. The aeronaut was placed on the bed and secured with ropes so that he could not rise. As the handcuffs were left on he could not help himself any more than an infant.

Whatever was in the minds of the Outerbridges there was great fear in that of Storm Rider. He looked at them with wild, dilated eyes, and words could not have been more eloquent. He did not beg for life, but he plainly felt it to be in the greatest peril. The Leather-Jacket was going away, and then Uncle Honest would have full sway. What would happen during the hours of darkness?

Storm Rider shivered as with ague at the thoughts in his mind.

The light was left on the table, and Eliakim and his son moved toward the door. The latter paused for a moment and looked back. No pity for the helpless man on the bed was in his heart, but a queer feeling was stealing over him. He had taken part in many different kinds of wild scenes, but there was something particularly striking in the idea of leaving the aeronaut to the doubtful mercy of the man who, it seemed, would have cause to fear him if he escaped.

The sky navigator saw the backward glance and found the power of speech again.

"Don't go!" he exclaimed, feverishly, looking to Isaac as the one faint obstacle between him and death; but the sheriff shrugged his shoulders and went out without reply.

Uncle Honest first closed the door and then took a good-sized drink of whisky.

"You can go back to the hall, dear boy," he observed, his utterance even milder and slower than usual.

Isaac changed his position uneasily.

"Shall you put Moss on trial to-morrow?" he asked.

"I can't say, at present."

"He will be a valuable witness," continued the son, awkwardly.

"Yes."

"He is supposed to hold the secret of the Ormes."

"Yes."

"Due patience will probably make him tell."

"Yes."

"I'll bet he makes a clean breast of it before another night, and that will help us a good deal. We shall then have the Ormes right in the hollow of our hand."

"Yes."

Uncle Honest's monosyllables were too much for the younger man. Believing that Storm Rider really was of value to them he wished to see the man alive and well on the following day, but he had grave doubts on the subject. He had spoken as plainly as he cared to, and the rest must be left, not to his father's mercy, but to his selfishness. Isaac hoped that the aeronaut's value as a witness would outweigh his dangerousness as an enemy, but he doubted it.

Parting with the Peacemaker at the door, Isaac moved toward the City Hall. When he had gone a few rods he paused and looked back.

"I would not give a picayune for that man's hold on life!" he muttered, uneasily; and then he resumed his way.

CHAPTER XXI.

A FRESH NOTE OF ALARM.

DOCTOR MARK HARTLEY arose the following morning in a peculiar frame of mind. He had gone to sleep with the resolution to help the Ormes all he could, but to act in the case merely as a dignified physician and an honest man. His first impulse to be a warm friend had been checked by the obstinate silence of the prisoners, and he intended now to be very cool and calculating.

He would do what he could to save them from the Outerbridge tribe, but only because, as an honest man, he ought to oppose villainy. He would try no more to learn their secrets, and when they were once clear of their enemies he would "drop them as he would a hot potato."

Such was the very unromantic way he expressed it, and it showed a lamentable state of mind when a physician of high standing could think of a potato, hat or otherwise, and a young lady at the same time; but Doctor Mark was vexed and piqued.

He fell asleep with the best of resolutions; he awoke with a new confusion and irritation upon him. He had had a dream, and in that dream he saw Vashti Orme standing on the brink of a precipice, and stretching out her hands and calling to him for help.

He was a man too wise by far to place any significance in dreams, but this vision of his slumber made an impression upon him—it was too vivid to be forgotten easily, and, somehow, he felt better acquainted with Vashti than he had done before. And his resolution to act the calm, deliberate physician, and nothing more, was in some danger of an overthrow. Not that he would admit it, even to himself—quite the contrary—but the fact remained.

After breakfast he started for the City Hall.

According to the plans marked out by the mountaineer, Mark had avoided any act which would place him in open conflict with Uncle Honest. That person might, and certainly did, suspect his want of loyalty, but no proof had yet been given, and the doctor marched into the court-room as boldly as though it was his own office.

He found only Aaron and Peter present.

"Good-morning, gentlemen," he said, briskly.

Both Leather-Jackets answered, and he could certainly find no fault with their manner.

"How's our patient?" Hartley continued.

"I'll let you see for yourself," Aaron replied.

"I was just going to send for you."

"Then Orme is worse?"

"No; I think not, but I thought it best to be on the safe side."

Such a sentiment from a Leather-Jacket in regard to a prisoner would have surprised the doctor, had he not possessed the key to Aaron's solicitude. As it was, he quietly replied:

"You were quite right. Joseph Orme needs care and attention. If he has it he will come out of his trouble all right; but carelessness and neglect may make him a cripple for life. We don't want men to put that blame upon us."

"Certainly not," Aaron agreed.

He conducted Hartley to Joseph. The latter was up, and Mark was agreeably surprised by his condition. The exertion of the previous day did not seem to have produced any ill effects, and he was stronger than before. Thanks to the sleeping accommodations provided by Uncle Honest, the case seemed progressing well.

The doctor was careful not to make his report too encouraging. He made an examination and bandaged the hip anew, and dwelt at some length on the necessity of care and absolute quiet. If the Outerbridges were determined to keep him prisoner, it was well that he should be considered little less than a fit subject for constant attention.

Aaron acted the sympathetic friend, and when Vashti came in he grew additionally cordial. He bade Hartley do his best, and look to the town treasury for recompense, and twice asked if the doctor could suggest anything more.

Whatever was advisable should be done, he said.

The Leather-Jacket was having his day. He wished that Joseph had broken his neck instead of injuring his hip, but, as it was, he must receive the attention due the brother of Vashti. All that Aaron said and did was designed to affect the girl, and he labored well.

Aaron, however, was not at ease mentally. The course of his true love did not promise to run smoothly. It seemed little less than madness for him to hope to secure Vashti. Uncle Honest had advised his sons to marry, but the injunction did not extend to persons the Peacemaker had seen fit to accuse.

Nobody knew better than Aaron how hard it was to save a person upon whom the ban of the Outerbridges had been placed. He did not dare confess his passion to Uncle Honest, for he knew what a storm he would raise. Isaac would not be less severe. The latter had discovered his younger brother's fancy, as Aaron well knew, but, as yet, Isaac did not regard it as serious.

The deputy-sheriff had, therefore, to prosecute his love affair and keep it secret from his relatives—all but Peter. With Peter there was a common bond, but, even there, no outspoken alliance existed.

Doctor Mark did not waste a great deal of time with the prisoners. He and Aaron returned to the court-room, and he proceeded to exchange a few words with Peter. Being very doubtful of Uncle Honest's good-will toward him, it was well to get on good terms with the sons.

After a few moments Aaron suddenly rose and went out. Hartley readily understood his object. Isaac was coming down the street. Aaron waited for him near the door. Peter was busy some distance away, and the doctor became ambitious to overhear what was said outside, though he had little hope of doing so.

Isaac would have gone on, but his brother stopped him.

"Wait a second," said he. "What has become of the other prisoner?"

"What prisoner?" Isaac asked, curtly.

"The one you took here last night."

"What do you know about him?"

"Hickman and Webb told me of the capture."

"They'd better keep their mouths shut!" growled Isaac.

"Haven't I a right to know what is going on?" retorted Aaron quickly.

"I suppose so."

"Then don't be so sharp."

"It would be well for you to remember our good father's doctrine of peace and good-will," coldly replied Isaac. "However, as to the latest prisoner, he has gone on."

"Gone on where?"

"That I don't know. I took him to the house and left him with father. This morning he was gone, and when I asked, like you, where he was, our good parent replied that he had 'gone on!'"

Isaac told the truth. Storm Rider was no longer in the Outerbridge house. Uncle Honest when questioned, said that he had found the man too insignificant to keep, and had ordered him to leave town at once. According to his carelessly-spoken statement, the aeronaut had promptly obeyed. There Isaac's questions ended, but he had his theory as to how Storm Rider had gone! He believed the man had started on a longer journey than any living man ever made.

Philosophically the Leather-Jacket accepted the explanation. He had believed Storm Rider a good man to hold as a witness, but if Eliakim had thought proper to get rid of him forever, the younger man had nothing to say.

Aaron readily understood the remark which might have been vague to others, and he had no more to say. He did not know what trepidation the prisoner's interview with Eliakim had

caused, nor realize how important the capture had been.

Isaac went on, and Aaron returned to the court-room. Nearly every word of the conversation had been overheard by Hartley, but he was not much the wiser. Some other unfortunate had felt the weight of the misnamed Peacemaker's enmity, and it might be his fate would never be more clearly explained.

The doctor was about to take his departure when Uncle Honest appeared.

How would he receive Mark?

That was the question in the doctor's mind, for he was not yet sure whether he had been placed under the ban with the Ormes. If Eliakim's manner was a criterion, this was soon settled. The old man was never more thoroughly himself, outwardly. Bland and good-humored, he saluted all with pleasant, appropriate words.

"A fine morning, doctor," he added.

"Very fine, Uncle Honest."

"Have you seen your patient?"

"Yes."

"How do you find him?"

"There is no change. Thanks to your care for him, he is no worse. His case is not dangerous, if properly managed, but any indiscretion would do untold mischief."

"Do you think a journey would be dangerous?"

"Most decidedly, yes."

"That is bad, for I am going to send him and the girl to Snakefoot Pass, to-morrow."

"I can't approve of that."

"Oh! we will take due precautions."

"I am afraid the journey will set him into a fever."

"We shall have to trust to luck."

"But what is the necessity of taking them to Snakefoot?"

"There has been a good deal of trouble, and I want them off my hands."

"Do you still believe them to be Gunnison Alf and Firefly Nell?"

"Yes."

"Suppose it should prove otherwise?"

"They have only to prove their innocence, and they will be set free."

"But what if they do prove this, and then we find Orme permanently injured by the effects of the journey?"

"Your question shows a philanthropic spirit which is very commendable, but the law cannot take notice of such things. I believe them guilty, as alleged, and I shall send them to Snakefoot to-morrow forenoon. For the first time in my public career, and here Uncle Honest's voice grew melancholy, "my course has been criticised. All public men must expect this, perhaps, but I am not accustomed to it. I am deeply grieved, and now I am determined to get rid of the cause of trouble."

CHAPTER XXII.

A DARING PLAN.

DOCTOR MARK had the strongest of reasons for maintaining his point, and he did so manfully.

"I am afraid the long journey will utterly cripple Orme," he persisted.

"I think not," Eliakim answered.

"But I speak from a medical standpoint."

"And I, from that of a believer in that Providence which suffers not a sparrow to fall unheeded," unctuously declared the Peacemaker.

"But will not Snakefoot Pass get the reward, if there should prove to be one?"

"A portion only, I think. In any case, a regard for vulgar money will not influence me."

"How about the fame of Hornets' Nest?"

"That rests with Providence, also."

Hartley relapsed into the silence of despair. He saw how utterly useless it was to continue the argument. The old man was in his most hypocritical mood, and it was impossible to move him.

The doctor's efforts had not been made from fears of injury to Joseph's hip. From the moment that Uncle Honest announced his intention of taking the prisoners to Snakefoot, another, and greater, fear had been upon the doctor. He felt sure that a plot was on foot which menaced the lives of the Ormes, and it was only by means of a strong effort that he had saved himself from openly showing his startled dismay.

The storm-clouds of doom were gathering thickly around the helpless captives—and where was aid to be found?

The doctor was in a state of mind almost chaotic, but summoned all his will and tried to appear natural. There were yet several hours—a whole day, according to what Outerbridge had said—in which to consider means of relief, and he became suddenly anxious to get to Yank Yellowbird.

The services of the mountaineer had rarely been more imperatively needed.

Hartley took his time in leaving, and passed several minutes in general conversation, but when clear of the court-room he went at once to Graham's. When he arrived there he was pleased to find only the host and Nevermiss in the kitchen, Mrs. Graham and Peggy being upstairs.

"We were expecting you," observed Graham.

"Why so?"

"We saw you go to the City Hall, and we thought you would have something worth telling."

"Unfortunately, I have."

"What! is there more bad news?"

"The very worst! Outerbridge announces that he will take the Ormes to Snakefoot Pass, to-morrow forenoon."

"Is that the bad news?" Yank asked.

"Yes."

"I don't jestly see the pint."

"The point is this: If our unfortunate friends start on that journey, they will never reach Snakefoot!"

"Land o' Goshen! do you mean—"

"I mean that it will be a funeral journey. Do you suppose Eliakim Outerbridge will willingly yield the profit and renown of capturing two noted criminals? Never! That is not his way. He knows very well that they are not Gunnison Alf and Firefly Nell—and, by the way, I don't believe that such persons exist; I think that pretended letter he read was really only a forgery."

"Jest my idee," Yank agreed.

"In regard to this latest move you can make up your mind I am right. Ask Graham."

"It would be like them," the old man agreed, tremulously.

"Strikes me you hev some atrocious insex hyar," the mountaineer observed.

"You are only beginning to find them out. If the Ormes are taken on that journey, it will be fatal. The vehicle would return with the news, that an attack had been made upon them by unknown desperadoes, and both prisoners shot. In case justice *should* reach for them, there would be five or six men to swear to the story, and not a particle of evidence on the other side."

Yank caressed his thin beard meditatively.

"You think they'll claim an attack, eh?"

"Yes."

"Then thar ought ter be one, by hurley!"

"Do you mean—"

"I've filled about ev'ry sp'ear which the wide West gives mortal man a chance at, 'ceptin' that o' road-agent. Up ter this time I've had scruples ag'in' that line o' business, but I consait I've ben too finikel. I feel a powerful hankerin' all o' a sudden ter branch out as a road-robber. 'Most all the Yellowbirds hev achieved glory in one way or another. Adam was a powerful good gardener; Noah was the best sailor alive at one time; an' my gran'father was a master-hand at the tick-tacks o' war. I've ben kept under by the egregious newrolgy, but my chance has now come. I'll blossom out as a road-agent—I will, by hurley!"

Nevermiss struck his open hand forcibly upon his knee, whereupon his dog started to his feet with a belligerent growl. Finding everything right, he sunk back, but his eyes gave Yank a surprised glance. Such vehemence was not in keeping with Moses's idea of dignity.

"Do you mean to advise a real attack on the Outerbridge party?" Mark asked, anxiously.

"To be sure."

"Who would make it?"

"A long-legged critter about my size."

"Alone?"

"The recruitin'-office is open."

"In all Hornets' Nest the Ormes have but three male sympathizers—Mr. Graham, you and me."

"The rest show egregious poor judgment."

"Come to the point, Nevermiss. Mr. Graham is too far advanced in years to join the party, but I am at your service. Neutrality shall no longer claim me. I will do my best to save the Ormes, and then bid Hornets' Nest farewell forever."

"That's the way ter talk. You remind me o' my gran'father now, though as he died afore I was born, I don't remember him as plain as I do you. Ter put it briefly, doctor, you an' me must swoop down on that outfit an' rescue the captives."

"There will be five or six guards."

"The more on 'em the merrier."

"Hard fighters, too."

"I take it, doctor, that you want to give me fair warnin'. Thar ain't an atom o' hesitation in yer manner, an' yer eyes have a gleam I like; but you want me ter understand clearly that an egregious pile o' tribulation may come o' our attempt."

"That is it, precisely."

"Consider it done. The odds be great, but I've seen it afore now that a lame dog kin bark an' bite like all creation. You an' I ain't ter be despised, ef we don't count up but two."

"Enough, mountaineer! I know your reputation too well to say more on this head. It is settled that we make the attempt, be the result what it may. Now, Outerbridge says they will leave here to-morrow forenoon. I know what that means. About half an hour before daylight the gang will sneak away, prisoners and all, and at sunrise the drama will be over. That is Uncle Honest's way—he works in the dark."

"He may git inter an atrocious darkness yet!" muttered the mountaineer. "But about their ambush. Whar do ye think it will be?"

"Not before Bull Head Rock is reached."

"I don't know whar that is, but we will lay our ambush *this* side o' Bull Head Rock, at the first p'int whar the lay o' the land is favorable."

"That meets my approval."

"Then it's all settled."

"Friends," remarked Graham, "I am reluctant to interfere in a case where the object is so noble, but I am compelled to say that it is sure death for you to try this plan. As Doctor Mark has said, there will be five or six of the guards, and not less than two of the Leather-Jackets will be of the number. What can you two men do against such a party? Bear in mind that they are desperate men to whom human lives lack one iota of sacredness."

"I've seen sech before," the mountaineer quietly replied. "I've met atrocious insex o' all classes, an' the nat'ral antipathy betwixt us has rendered the tussle uncommon lively, but I don't mind 'em half so much as I do a voylent attack of newrolgy. That's a trouble that will warp the j'int's mortal bad. I knowed a man once who had his hip dislocated by a fall. Wal, he took newrolgy in it, an' the fu'st bad twinge throwed the hip back inter the socket."

"That was remarkable," said Graham, doubtfully.

"Not at all. I once had the same diffikilty so bad that it set all my bones ter jumpin' at once. I was powerful thin of flesh at that time, an' the bones rattled together so that you'd thought a drum an' cymbals was playin' some melancholy tune."

"It will be the bullets of the Leather-Jackets that will rattle against your bones to-morrow," retorted Graham.

"I expect ter git a few gunshot diffikilties, but it won't be anything new; I'm full o' lead, now. I've growed up on sech troubles, an' nobody but a Yellowbird could 'a' stood it. Tribulation! Why, it comes as nat'ral ter me as breathin'. When I's a baby I had all the malignant complaints sev'ral times—war-whoop cough twice; measles, three times; mumps, four times; and bumps not less than a good many hundreds."

"When these a'flections let up the gals begun ter plague me. I was gittin' bigger, an' pootier, but I soon found that good looks a confusion an' a snare. All the young females set their caps fur me, an' they worried me like a passel o' wolves arter a wounded buffler."

"Once, I went ter a huskin'-bee. Ef I'd knowed the rules I wouldn't 'a' been ketched thar, nohow, but I was jest as innercent as a lamb until they tol' me 'twas a fixed practyse fur a chap ter kiss a pooty gal ev'ry time he found a red ear o' corn. That started the p'rosperation out o' me like hurley, an' I tol' 'em I felt sick, an' I guessed I'd go home an' hev my marm make me some peppermint tea."

"I'd 'a' gone, too, but they wouldn't let me, an' as I seen I was in fur it, I took a seat 'way over in one corner an' consaited ter myself the gals would be mortal smart ter git me. Wal, gals be smart, an' I found it out, fur one o' the critters—an egegrious pooty little thing, with red hair, and with eyes as big as sas'sers—come an' plumped herself down right afore me, pennin' me inter the corner, tight."

"She give me sev'ral sly looks, and she made some remarks, but I was so egegrious flustered I didn't ketch a word she said. I begun ter husk like 'all creation, an' that was whar I made my mistake. The nat'ral result was that I soon found a red ear o' corn. I took faint an' weak right off, but I slipped the consarned thing under my coat quick as scat. I hoped nobody had seed it, but I want enough pun'kins ter fool the red-headed gal."

"What's that?" sez she.

"What's what?" sez I.

"That you slid under yer coat so quick," sez she.

"'Twas a mouse," sez I, hopin' ter skeer her.

"I like mice," sez she, with a snicker; an' with that she yanked my coat away an' the red ear rolled out."

"Up I bounced right off, an' I p'inted my nose fur the door, but I didn't git fur. That egegrious gal laid hold o' my coat, an' she hung on like hurley."

"Red ear! red ear!" sez she.

"I consait the ear was white compared ter the color o' my face, fur my misery was suthin' melancholy. I kicked an' squirmed, but 'twan't no use; the crowd kept me in."

"Kiss Sukey!" they yelled.

"Hang Sukey!" sez I, beginnin' ter blubber.

"Pay yer forfeit," sez they.

"It ain't right," sez I. "I's a wal-brought-up boy," sez I, "an' sech levity is hijjus. Lemme go!" sez I.

"Shame on ye!" sez they.

"I be ashamed," sez I.

"I'll cure ye," sez Sukey, nigh chokin' with gigglin', an' then I'll be condemn'd ef that gal didn't sling her arms around my neck an' hug me like all git out. She squared up the matter o' the red ear so't I didn't owe nothin', too, but I a'most died o' mortification."

"Them oncivil critters made me stay 'the evenin' out, but you kin bet I didn't find no more red ears. That was my last huskin'-bee,

too, fur I didn't mean ter be imposed on. That's a fair sample o' how I've waded knee-deep in tribulation, an' I needn't give no more on 'em."

"Yes, doctor, we'll be on hand ter play road-agent on that stage, ter-morrer," Nevermiss concluded.

"I only wish I was young enough to join you," said Graham, with a sigh.

"Don't think on't. That reminds me, how about sellin' Graham's property at auction, doctor?"

"Outerbridge has postponed it."

"Lucky fur him."

Hartley had one more thing upon his mind. The fragment of conversation between Isaac and Aaron had told him of another prisoner who had appeared and disappeared. It was a mystery who this man was, but, naturally, he thought of the Storm Rider.

He told Yank and Graham what he knew, and it was agreed that his theory was plausible. As a partial test the mountaineer agreed to make another search for the aeronaut in the mountains that afternoon. All, however, were afraid that the person in question had fallen into the hands of his enemies.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A MYSTERY FOR ALL PARTIES.

THERE was only one road leading away from Hornets' Nest—that which led to Snakefoot Pass. Everywhere else the surrounding country was wild, mountainous and broken, and it would have puzzled the well-known ingenuity of Western railroad men to find even a tortuous line on which to lay rails. When Hornets' Nest dreamed of a railroad, it thought only of the road to Snakefoot.

This course was not always direct, but a succession of passes and gulches had done remarkably well for them, and as a stage-road it was beyond reproach, if not direct.

Near a bend of a gulch, where an overhanging cliff was known as Bull Head Rock, five men were gathered the morning succeeding the events last described. Their appearance was peculiar and striking. Every man was masked.

They were well-armed; they were poorly-dressed; they looked like so many tramps on the war-path.

Had they been unmasked they would have been recognizable as men of Hornets' Nest—the very dregs of the hybrid population. These men toiled not, neither did they dig for gold, but they found a means of subsistence. Rascals that they were, they formed an important part of Uncle Honest's "reform" plan. True, the average citizen never saw him even address these anti-toilers, but all streams do not flow on the surface. The stream of Uncle Honest's public career was subterranean, secret and dark.

The masked men had a definite object in being at Bull Head Rock, but they grew impatient with waiting. They watched the road from Hornets' Nest constantly. At first they were patient, but hours rolled on and they became uneasy. They were there with definite orders, however, and they remained at their post.

What they looked for did not come. Not a human being was visible along the road. The sun mounted up the sky, and as its hot rays poured down on the bare ledges, the men fell to grumbling. Their lot seemed to them a hard one, and they wished themselves well out of the venture.

Relief did not come in the way of their expected prey, and wonder was in every mind. What had happened to overturn the plans of the day? They had no orders to guide them in such an emergency, and noon found them still watching the trail.

There were other watchers. Two miles nearer Hornets' Nest another party had undergone the same experience. They were Doctor Mark and Yank. Their had remained firm in their dangerous resolution, and had taken a carefully-selected position from which to ambush the Outerbridge party on their way to Snakefoot.

Their experience, as before said, had been a repetition of that of the masked men. The Ormes and their guards did not appear; there was no one to ambush. For hours they watched the trail, but nobody relieved the monotony of the winding road with signs of life. Surprise and doubt had given place to a well-grounded suspicion, and Doctor Mark had consulted his watch for the twentieth time.

"We will wait until eleven o'clock," he said.

Eleven o'clock came, and he abruptly rose.

"We may as well give it up," he announced.

"I consait you are right," Nevermiss agreed.

"Something must have happened at Hornets' Nest."

"What?"

"Don't ask me. Perhaps the Ormes have been taken to some lonely gulch near the village and—you can surmise the rest."

"I surmise a good many things, but the trouble is ter pick out the right clew. It's possible we hev fell inter an egegrious trap, set by that varmint, Eliakim. Mebbe he never intended ter take the Ormes ter Snakefoot, but sorter suspected you, an' give ye a chance ter

betray yerself. Mind, now, that's only a possible idea; but ef it's kerreck, I consait you've run right inter the trap."

"We will test it by returning to the village," Hartley calmly replied.

"That's the quickest way o' settlin' it. Some common thing may hev changed their plans, or we may find the village in a mortal uproar."

"And arrest awaitin' us."

"To be sure."

"We shall surrender, of course," Mark ironically added.

"Thar ain't a doubt on't."

"Mountaineer, I find myself growing reckless. I have aspired to be a calm, emotionless doctor, and nothing more, but my blood is stirred up seriously. I verily believe I should enjoy a brush with the Outerbridges."

"Thar ain't an artom o' doubt that you'll hev the chance. I hev an idee that peace is over thar, an' that there will be some atrocious scuffles 'twixt us an' them. One thing let me urge upon ye, doctor"—here the veteran shook his finger gravely at Hartley—"ef we git inter a fight, let's uphold our fam'ly pedigree at all costs. The Yellowbirds ain't a race that like ter be put down—an', by hurley! they won't be put down!"

"I will not waste words to remind you of the odds against us, and I will follow you through. This iniquitous gang at the village can command my toleration no longer. Come; let us start back!"

"To be sure. Come on, Moses; thar ain't no game hyar, an' we may as wal go an' offer ourselves fur game."

The grim dog seemed to think that an inglorious failure had been scored, and he followed his master without any demonstration.

The men did not venture to return by the road, but kept near enough to it to make sure no one passed.

In due time the village again appeared to their view. They stood on a cliff, half-concealed by bushes, and looked down into the depression. There lay Hornets' Nest, quiet, peaceful, without a perceptible change.

Doctor Mark looked inquiringly at his companion.

"No excitement there."

"Not an artom."

"Do you see an Outerbridge anywhere?"

"No."

"Have you any new theory?"

"Can't say I have."

"Then what do you advise?"

"That we go ter Graham's at once. I hope we'll get thar without notice."

Uneasiness was perceptible in the veteran's manner, for the impression was growing upon him that their secret journey might yet get them into trouble. It would do no good to dwell upon it, so he said no more. They resumed their journey, approaching Graham's in the most favorable way. They were anxious to avoid attention, but were too wise to adopt skulking tactics.

As they approached the door, they saw Graham sitting by the window in deep thought—so deep that he did not hear or see them until they entered. Then he sprung to his feet.

"So you're back!" he exclaimed.

"Yes. What's happened here?"

"Haven't you heard?"

"No."

"Everybody else knows. The Ormes are gone!"

"Gone where?"

"Heaven only knows."

"I don't understand. They did not come along the Snakefoot road—"

"For which there was the best of reasons. When the Leather-Jackets got ready to take them away, they were found to have disappeared strangely."

"Escaped?"

"Not of their own efforts. Somebody had forced an entrance at the rear of the City Hall, and then taken them away."

"Is this the story Eliakim Outerbridge tells?"

"Yes."

"The man lies!"

"How do you know?"

"His 'fine Italian hand' is visible in the work. It is he who has taken them away. His talk about conveying them to Snakefoot, which I thought absurd at the start, was only a cunning dodge to put us on the wrong track."

"I shared your views at first, but I am now convinced that Uncle Honest has been beaten."

"Convinced by what?"

"His manner and conduct. The Leather-Jackets are in a rage, and the old man no longer talks of peace. He is very angry and disappointed, and has offered a reward for their recapture. He called for every man who could follow a trail."

"What luck?" the mountaineer asked quickly.

"None. There was nobody here who even claimed to be a trailer."

Yank nodded sharply, and his face expressed satisfaction. He knew a man who *was* a trailer."

"I could give a dozen reasons, and will do so later," added Graham, "but, for now, let it suffice that I feel positive the Outerbridges are

wholly ignorant of how the rescue was effected, or where the Ormes are."

"Then who could have done it?"

"I have thought of Storm Rider—"

"Remember what I heard Isaac say, and my theory that Storm Rider has come to grief."

"I was about to add that Outerbridge says two men were concerned in the rescue, and Storm Rider certainly had no companion."

"The mystery is perplexing," admitted the doctor, thoughtfully. "Who was on guard at the City Hall last night?"

"Isaac and two other men."

"Isaac is not the man to let a prisoner be snatched from under his very nose thus."

"He fell asleep, it seems."

"Was not Knifebelt taken away, too?"

"No."

"That is strange."

"The whole affair is strange, and I assure you that Eliakim is an angry man. I have no doubt that he intended to take the Ormes to Snakefoot, but his prey has been wrested from his grasp in the very moment of action. Who did it? Who *could* have done it? All Hornets' Nest is with him, yet the rescue was made. It puzzles the Outerbridges as much as us. Now, what does it mean?"

The question was one of the class that is easier asked than answered. They had calculated on almost everything, and prepared for it, but the one thing they had not expected had come to pass.

CHAPTER XXIV.

PETER ILLUSTRATES A FINE POINT.

HARTLEY finally became convinced that Uncle Honest did not know any more about the mysterious disappearance than he did. It would have been much easier to arrive at that conclusion had he known of the men waiting at Bull Head Rock. Eliakim's intentions had been accurately judged at the start, and he did not possess a shadow of evidence to show who had accomplished the rescue.

In the conversation between Hartley and Graham, little part had been taken by Yank Yellowbird, but when they found themselves wholly at a loss, this fact occurred to them.

"One of our number is very silent," observed Mark.

"True—Nevermiss has nothing to say," answered Graham.

"I consait it's a time fur action, not words," Yank added.

"But you have a theory—"

"Not an oita, so ter speak. We might guess a dozen things, but what's the good on 'em? We kin do better than ter start a guess-school. I consait that ef the rescuers wa'n't spooks nor hoggoblins they must 'a' left a trail."

"Ha! I did not think of that!" Mark exclaimed. "I am insufferably stupid. Quick, mountaineer; what is your plan?"

"Fur you an' me ter take the trail an' foller it!"

"Good! When can we go?"

"Now!"

"I am ready."

Hartley sprung to his feet, and even Graham's downcast face lighted up. There was no question as to the ability of the mountaineer to do the indicated work. Half his adventuresome life had been passed in such undertakings, and a trail was to him like a book to be read line by line. The "signs" left by the rescuers might be obscure, but if they were capable of unravelment, Yank was the man to do it.

No time was lost in getting away, and as they had no preparations to make, they were gone almost before Graham had finished his speech of warning. He watched them go away with a thoughtful expression on his face.

"Brave hearts! brave hearts!" he murmured. "I only wish I was young enough to accompany them, but I must see all these perils and stirring scenes as an idle spectator. Would to Providence I had never set foot in Hornets' Nest! The town never deserved its name more under the rule of the old-time roughs than it has done since Eliakim Outerbridge took charge. When Yank and the doctor return, I believe I shall ask their advice as to the advisability of deserting my home, and taking Hannah and Peggy away. Better forfeit my poor home than to expose them to further danger."

He heard the voice of Peggy singing in the room above.

She had experienced great relief at hearing of the disappearance of Joseph and Vashti, and the song she was rendering was light and airy, but Graham noticed that her former vivacity was not apparent in it.

He fell into thought and did not arouse until footsteps sounded outside the house. He looked up, and then his face grew pale.

Uncle Honest was moving toward the door.

What errand had brought him there Cyrus Graham did not know, but his appearance aroused the liveliest apprehensions in the honest old man's mind. He was deeply under Eliakim's displeasure, and he felt sure that no friendly motive had led to the visit.

Uncle Honest crossed the threshold, and a new, grim expression on his face made him look like Sheriff Isaac.

"Good-afternoon," he said, stolidly.

"Good-afternoon," faltered Cyrus.

"Are you alone?"

"My wife and Peggy are up-stairs."

"Where is Yellowbird?"

"He has gone out."

"He was here a few minutes ago."

"Yes; but he went away."

"With Hartley?"

Graham dared not deny the fact, so he admitted it.

"Where did they go?"

"I don't know, Uncle Honest; I told them about the escape of the Ormes, and they went out to get the latest news."

"You must have surprised them," observed Eliakim, with an undisguised sneer.

"I did."

"Humph! Are you a fool, Graham, or do you think me one?"

Uncle Honest's voice was strongly bitter and severe for that of a "peacemaker," and he frightened Graham more than ever. His own voice trembled pitifully as he stammered:

"I did not mean—that is, surely, I said nothing, to lead you to infer—"

"I infer nothing. Where were Hartley and Yellowbird during the last hours of the night?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Will you shield them at the risk of your own neck?"

"I know nothing to shield them for."

"You know they went away last night and only just got back. Somebody rescued the prisoner—who, if not our precious doctor and the lank mountaineer?"

"My dear sir," cried Graham, "you are wholly wrong; I assure you that you are. They did not know of the escape of the Ormes until I told them."

"A likely story."

"It is true."

"Then where were they last night?"

"That I don't know," Graham replied, after brief hesitation.

"Mr. Graham," icily pronounced the Peacemaker, "I yesterday forfeited your property to the town, but out of regard for your old age, deferred the sale. Whether or not you are to be beggared depends upon yourself. Confess that Hartley and his ill-favored crony liberated the Ormes, and your property shall remain yours forever; refuse and, by St. Paul, I'll strip you of every cent you have in the world!"

The massive ruler of Hornets' Nest leaned back in his chair and regarded Graham keenly. Gone was the reformer, gone the "peacemaker," gone the benevolent old gentleman; and in his place was a harsh, imperious, merciless man whose words did not reveal his utter want of honor any more plainly than his hard, angry face. In that crisis he saw fit to throw off the mask and give his trembling companion a glimpse of his real character.

Graham felt his last hope vanish.

"Mr. Outerbridge," he feverishly replied, "I swear to you that, as far as my knowledge goes, your suspicions are without foundation. I firmly believe—nay, I *know*, that my friends had no hand in the rescue!"

"But you will not deny that you know where they went last night?"

"I will give my word of honor that they did not go to the City Hall, nor near it."

"But sent other men, eh?"

"No, indeed. No, no; they had no part in the rescue, nor did they dream of attempting it."

Eliakim had been looking intently at his companion, as though he would read his very thoughts, but he now made an impatient gesture.

"Why do I waste words with you?" he harshly returned. "You will stick to your story through thick and thin, and I don't know that I am sorry. You are opposed to me, and would never be less than an enemy. I know how to deal with such persons. The Ormes are gone, but the City Hall remains. You and your family shall occupy the place left vacant!"

Mr. Graham put forth his trembling hands imploringly.

"Spare us!" he exclaimed, in a husky voice.

"Consider how old my wife and I are; consider—"

"Your perverse folly? Exactly; that is all that interests me now. I shall deal with you according to your deserts."

Uncle Honest arose and marched toward the door. He went out with another plea from Graham falling on his ears. Those ears, if not deaf, were indifferent, and he stalked away toward the City Hall without a backward glance.

Graham dropped into a chair with a groan. The crash had at last come, and come with a vengeance, too. It left him weak and helpless, and he covered his face with his hands and sat there, statue-like, while precious moments passed by unheeded. His position had not changed when the inner door opened and Peggy appeared.

She stopped short as she saw his evident sorrow, and then ran forward and clasped her arms around his neck.

"Oh! daddy, daddy! what is it?" she exclaimed.

He poured out the whole wretched story in broken words. It was a vague, incoherent narrative, but it sufficed to explain the situation to Peggy. She suddenly sprung to her feet.

"Do you know what we are to do?" she demanded. "What is our house compared to freedom? Let us flee to the hills at once; let us escape while we can. We shall not starve. Brave Yank will find us; Providence will watch over us. Quick, daddy; let us go!"

It was good advice, but it came too late. Once more footsteps sounded, and Uncle Honest appeared, with Peter and three other men at his heels. The gray-bearded leader pointed to the inmates of the house.

"There are your prisoners!" he announced, stolidly.

In marched the men. Their attention was upon Graham, and they plainly intended to secure him first, but Peggy sprung in front of them.

"You shall not touch him!" she declared. "For shame on you, to molest a harmless old man!"

"You'd better get out o' the way!" growled the man.

"I will not!"

"Then I'll make ye."

"Touch me, if you dare!"

Peggy was more spirited than logical, for she had not the least means of doing damage, but the ruffian hesitated. He looked back at Uncle Honest.

"Obey me!" the leader added.

With a quick movement the fellow flung Peggy aside, and then he laid hold of Graham. But Peggy was not yet subdued. She bravely returned to the attack, and in a moment more that offending hand, as it rested on Graham's shoulder, was ornamented with the red lines of several finger-nails. A belligerent cat could not have done more effective work than Peggy.

Her victim uttered a roar of anger and sprung at her. Gallantry was with him an unheard-of virtue, and he brutally seized her by the throat.

"You tiger-cat!" he hissed—but he spoke no further.

There was the sound of a blow—a heavy fall—and then the ruffian lay stretched upon the floor, and Peter Outerbridge stood over him, cool and grim.

Uncle Honest stared at his youngest offspring in startled wonder.

"What in the world have you done?" he demanded.

"I've illustrated a point, and a mighty fine one," calmly answered Peter. "You told Dodge to do one thing, and he did another. You see how he came out."

"But, my dear boy, you ought to bear with a faithful follower—"

"He laid his hand in violence on a woman, and he got what he deserved. If he tries his game again, I'll knock him down a second time!"

It was a very commendable utterance, but Peggy did not beam upon Peter as a gallant knight-errant suddenly aroused to her aid. He had "illustrated a point" well, but all through pure selfishness. He had done it to win Peggy's favor, and she knew it just as well as she knew that if the march of events was against Peter's hopes, he would become her bitter enemy as suddenly as he had knocked Dodge down.

The fallen man arose slowly. None of the combativeness was knocked out of him—far from it—but he knew that he must yield to the son of Uncle Honest. If it was the pleasure of that young man to knock him down, why, he must allow it.

The incident had had a peculiar effect on nearly everybody, and when Uncle Honest, in a low voice, directed his men to go on with their work, Graham and Peggy yielded without a word. True, resistance would have been vain, but Peter's blow seemed to have cast a spell over all in the room except himself.

The capture was quietly made, and in a short time the Grahams and Peggy were prisoners at the City Hall.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE SAWTOOTH TRAIL.

UNCLE HONEST had timed his visit to Graham's in a way highly favorable to Hartley and the mountaineer. They could not very well follow the trail of the Ormes without starting from the City Hall, and Yank, for one, expected to find some trouble in doing this.

It did not seem likely that the Outerbridges would remain passive while this was going on.

Luckily, Eliakim was then on his way to Graham's, and if the trailers were observed by any one else they were not molested.

Arriving at the rear of the City Hall they first saw a hole in the wall several feet from the ground, while near the building lay an overturned ladder. These facts explained how the unknown rescuer, or rescuers, had gone in, and how he and the escaped prisoners had gone out. The next thing was to find the trail, and, after a glance around, Doctor Mark mentally pronounced that a hopeless task; dozens of men had tried before them, and the ground was covered

with dim footprints. How were those of the right parties to be found?

Considerably to Mark's surprise Nevermiss spent only a short time near the building, but struck off toward the mountains, gradually leaving the village behind. Utter silence prevailed, and the doctor devoted his time to watching for possible molestation rather than annoying Yank.

Once clear of the village the mountaineer turned to his dog.

"Moses," he briefly uttered.

The dog had been restless and uneasy, and he had watched his master in a curious way. He now gained Yank's side at a bound, and his big eyes lighted up in a way which surprised Hartley.

"Hyar's the trail," added Yank, resting one finger on the ground. "Foller it, dog; foller it, Moses!"

Down went the shaggy head; Moses took a long, deliberate sniff at the earth, and then he started off in a direct line.

"He'll foller faster nor you or I could," explained Yank. "Mankind kin wobble their tongues brisker than any other animal, but when it comes ter noses, dogs leave 'em egregiously behind. See Moses go it; he's anxious ter keep up the Yellowbird pedigree, that dog is."

"Why didn't you put him on the trail at first, if you had found it?"

"Because we've only just got clear o' other trails which overlapped."

"Are you sure we have the right one?"

"I don't doubt it an atom."

"Remember that I am a novice, and tell me, if you will, how you could pick out the right one from among scores of wrong ones."

"Did you ever notice that women wear shoes with heels like a toothpick? A most atrocious habit, done jest ter make b'lieve they hev small feet, while it's a melancholy fact that ef that same woman steps barefoot on soft s'ile, she'll leave a track big as an old-fashioned pancake—she will, by hurley!"

"I have noticed the ridiculous style of their shoes."

"That's what helped me. Vashti is a mortal pooty gal, but I consaited even that wouldn't keep her from bein' given ter the follies o' fashion. I looked fer a ramrod-footprint, an' I found 'em. I needn't tell ye they was a good bit dim—ef they'd been plain, the other s'archers would 'a' done the job ahead on us. Yas, I allow we're on the track, an' you kin see Moses is confident as a gal in courtin'-time."

"The dog heads for Sawtooth Ridge."

"Jes' so."

"Will he be able to follow so easily to the end?"

"I doubt it a good 'eal. You know the Ridge wal enough, I consait, ter be aweer that it is covered with ledges, an' thar I expeck Moses ter lose the scent. He's a most uncommon dog, is Moses; but thar is limits ter his nose. My gran'father, the Revolutionary relict, tells in his book on the tick-tacks o' war about a man whose nose was so 'cute he could tell by the smell jest how much hard-tack, ras'berry jam an' fresh-seed oysters the enemy had in camp, but noses ain't what they was a hund'ud year ago. My Cousin Heliogabalus's wife's aunt was mortal good at smellin' out secrets, but her nose wa'n't reliable—'twas so long she frequently observed things that wa'n't so."

By this time the base of the hills was reached, and Yank paused where a spot of earth, bare of vegetation, enabled him to observe the footprints critically.

He devoted considerable time to the task, while Hartley looked on with interest.

"Three on 'em, besides the Ormes," the mountaineer finally observed, as he stood erect.

"I judge that you do not suspect their identity?"

"You judge right; I ain't got the least idee."

"Storm Rider may be alive—can he have been one?"

"Most sartainly not. You describe him as a slender man, rigged out in sort o' fash'onable clothes, an' it follers that he wore boots ter match. Most likely, too, his foot was small—"

"It was. I noticed that he wore a small shoe, with very narrow toes."

"Ev'ry one o' them three men had boots as big as mine, an' you'll obsarve that my feet only stopped growin' when they got afeerd they'd be mistook fur trunks. Whether Storm Rider is alive or not, we shall have ter leave him out o' this case."

"Then who, in the name of all that is mysterious, were the rescuers?"

"Now you've got me, by hurley! but the way ter find it ain't ter stan' hyar. Moses is lookin' back impatient at us, an' I allow we'd better go on."

The journey was resumed, and they entered the wild area of the hills. At first the advance was not checked, for the trail wound through a gulch, but when one-fourth of a mile had been passed over, the dog lost the trail at a wide ledge. If Moses was noted for any one thing it was stubbornness, and he ran all about in the endeavor to recover the lost clew, but it soon became so apparent that his efforts would avail

nothing, that Yank started out to find where the party had left the ledge.

He was busy several minutes, and Doctor Mark saw with growing uneasiness that he was at fault. Look where he might no more footprints could be found. The veteran finally paused, leaned upon his rifle and pointed his index finger full at his companion.

"I've made one diskevery."

"What is that?"

"Whoever took the Ormes out wa'n't no strangers 'round hyar."

"How do you know?"

"I b'lieve their rowt was planned ahead, an' that they made fur this ledge on purpose ter break the trail. You'll obsarve that the ledge has spurs which branch off like a splder's legs, hyar an' thar. Wal, they've gone along one o' them spurs, which shows a good head back on't. Ef I was puzzled afore ter know who the parties be, I'm a good 'eal more puzzled now. Now, what old resident has turned ag'in' Eliakim?"

"I cannot imagine."

"It's egregious funny."

The mountaineer removed his old fur cap and stirred up his flaxen hair vigorously.

"It's 'most as funny," he averred, "as the case in the Yellowbird pedigree hist'ry whar my uncle, Moses—I named my canine frien' fur him—led the children o' Israel through the Red Sea on a road he dug out o' the water. He was a pooty good sailor, my uncle was; but I don't s'pose he knowed an artom about follerin' a trail in the mountains o' Idaho."

The speaker shouldered his rifle with a resolute air and turned away. He had suffered a check, but that did not mean that he was baffled; on the contrary, he expected to succeed.

He resumed work zealously, and the several spurs of the ledge were examined one after another, but the coveted discovery was not easily made. Along some of them the fugitives had certainly gone, and Yank's efforts soon developed the fact that great care had been used to leave no trail. Evidently they had made a zig-zag course, sacrificing speed and everything else to secrecy.

Seeing nothing more promising, he sought blindly for a clew.

An intervening line of earth between rocks caused him to direct Doctor Mark to pause.

Then he bent over the friendly area.

Not long did it take him to settle the point. He arose and gave Hartley a short nod.

"They went this way," he announced. "The same set o' tracks are here, an' they was still makin' fur the heart o' the hills. You'll obsarve that the rocks begin ag'in' right away, an' our triberlations will continue. We've got ter fight our way inch by inch, but I consait we'll succeed in the end—unless they keep right on goin'. Ef they do, they'll git ter the Saskatchewan River afore we get out o' sight of this Outerbridge town."

The work was resumed, and considerable more ground covered. It was a slow, laborious occupation. Depending on such an unsubstantial clew as an occasional footprint, Yank was obliged to make many a useless detour, and his skill as a trailer was only valuable to enable him to distinguish a track when one had been made at rare intervals.

It would have been very different if he had had an unbroken trail, however obscure it might be.

After long labor and slow advance Doctor Mark recognized the fact that they were near the point where he had first seen the balloon. He was about to mention this when a warning growl from Moses directed all attention to him. His manner had grown belligerent, and he was directing his gaze toward a point at right angles with their course.

They followed his example, and an unexpected sight was revealed to them.

Sixty rods away the side of a narrow ridge descended at a gradual slope, and on the hillside hung a balloon, fully inflated, but, it seemed poorly secured to the ground, for it swayed and bobbed around most erratically.

"By heavens!" exclaimed the doctor, "we have made a discovery, at any rate."

"What is it?"

"I've seen that balloon before—it is Storm Rider's. Why should it be there, inflated, unless he is there, too?"

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE SKY NAVIGATOR'S PERIL.

THE balloon swayed to and fro like a giant trying to burst his bonds, and Doctor Mark half-expected to see it break away, in reality, and go soaring upward. Then he saw something else which verified the prediction he had so lately made. Out from behind the balloon, and a few intervening bushes, came a man, and the doctor uttered a shout.

"It is Storm Rider!" he cried.

"Stay hyar an' watch!" quickly directed the mountaineer, "an' I'll go to him. We mustn't lose sight of the man."

He hurried away, and Hartley was left alone. He watched the aeronaut intently, excitedly, and was not long in making the discovery that the man was injured in some way. He was

working about the balloon, but seemed scarcely able to move his limbs. Every movement appeared painful, but he did not pause for a moment.

"It looks as though he was preparing to go away," muttered Mark, uneasily.

He glanced toward the ridge to see if there were any signs of the mountaineer. There was not, but another view, and one of more thrilling interest, was vouchsafed. Two men were slowly ascending the east side of the ridge, and Doctor Mark recognized Uncle Honest and Eph Hickman.

The discovery gave the doctor a start. Their course was directly toward the balloon, and when they reached the top of the ridge, the airship and aeronaut would be visible to them. Mark did not know what events had occurred between Storm Rider's capture and the moment of the scene he was witnessing, but he felt sure that the Sky Navigator had barely escaped with his life.

Certainly, Uncle Honest was his deadly enemy, and discovery meant misfortune—perhaps death.

The necessity of warning him without delay was so evident that Hartley forgot all else and ran forward to execute the project. His journey was but a short one—he had not gone a hundred feet when he found his course interrupted by a canyon.

One glance was enough to show that it was impassable. It was wide and deep, and the sides were too precipitous to be descended. Worse than all, it stretched far to both sides.

Only one thing was left for him to do; possibly he could warn the aeronaut by shouting. The wind was blowing briskly from the east, and this, and the distance, was against him, but it was worth trying. He did try, and exerted every capacity of his lungs, but Storm Rider continued his labor without interruption; the doctor's voice could not reach him with the wind blowing so unfavorably.

As this fact became apparent to Hartley he once more gave heed to what the aeronaut was doing, and it became evident that he was about to cut the balloon loose and start skyward. He had severed most of the fastenings, and was clambering into the basket.

Hartley looked anxiously toward Uncle Honest and Hickman; they were still ascending the east side of the ridge.

It now became a question of whether Storm Rider would get away in time to avoid a collision, and it was one of intense interest to the doctor. The chances were against the solitary man, and Hartley trembled for him. Uncle Honest was alarmingly near the crest of the ridge.

But Storm Rider was not idle. Wholly ignorant of his danger, he was taking his time, but sufficient progress had been made to cut the balloon entirely loose. He leaned out of the basket and drew a knife across the rope; it parted and the airship shot upward.

A moment more and he began to throw out superfluous ballast, and the balloon rose rapidly. For awhile the ridge shielded it from the breeze, but only temporarily—it entered the prevailing current and began to move toward the west. There lay the hope of escape, but not yet did Doctor Mark dare to exult.

The two men had reached the top of the ridge, and Hickman carried a rifle.

The word "surprise" but feebly expresses the emotions of Uncle Honest and his follower as they saw what was before them. They could not avoid seeing the balloon. It had not mounted into the air, but was drifting away over the valley to the west of the ridge. It was a vivid, living picture, and the aeronaut was so plainly revealed that Eliakim recognized him at once.

For a moment the old man was dazed, but his usual presence of mind soon returned. He saw that the man whom he hated and feared was fast going to a place of safety, and his active mind readily found a means of checking his career.

He turned quickly to Hickman.

"Shoot!" he gasped.

Hickman promptly dropped upon one knee, and his rifle was brought to his shoulder. He would have laughed at the idea of missing at that distance.

"Shoot!" repeated Uncle Honest, loudly.

"Let the wicked perish from the face of the earth forever. Put a bullet through the balloon, and bring him to the ground!"

A cruel smile appeared on his face as he spoke; his plan seemed strikingly clever. The escape of gas would cause the balloon to collapse, and a fall to the rocks below would end Storm Rider's career forever.

Hickman pressed the trigger.

Only a dull click followed; the weapon had missed fire.

"Again!" shouted Uncle Honest. "Put a bullet through the balloon or the man; I don't care which."

The repeating rifle was again leveled, but the barrel was not steady. Hickman had grown confused, and the weapon wobbled perceptibly.

Again he pulled the trigger, and this time the rifle did not fail. A bullet went whistling toward the balloon, and Outerbridge watched

the result eagerly. Storm Rider was seen to look around, but in no way did he betray excitement.

"You have missed!" cried Uncle Honest, angrily. "Shoot again; and if you miss, I'll shoot you!"

Obediently enough Hickman pulled the trigger, but his nerves were utterly upset. This time he had aimed at the man, instead of the balloon, and it was plain that he had made another failure.

Uncle Honest snatched the rifle away and, kneeling on the rocky surface, sent bullet after bullet flying toward the air-ship. It was now an effort of desperation. The balloon was moving rapidly away, and the best of marksmen would have had little real hope, but the warlike "Peacemaker" did not cease until he had emptied the weapon.

Then he hurled it against a rock with such force that the stock was splintered.

Despite the fusillade, the balloon was going on triumphantly, and, soaring higher in the air, bade fair to soon be entirely out of sight to those who stood on Sawtooth Ridge.

Hickman looked anxiously at Uncle Honest. The latter's face had assumed a purplish hue, and the evidence was so strong of his being in an ungovernable rage that his follower almost expected a personal collision with him. Hickman was not a coward, but he knew the ways of Eliakim Outerbridge well enough not to desire his enmity.

Not until the leader's gaze was again withdrawn from the balloon was the silence broken. Then Hickman meekly, regretfully stammered:

"I—I am very sorry I missed."

"Don't mention it, my good Hickman," replied Uncle Honest, in his usual mild, bland manner.

His want of outward emotion staggered Hickman, but did by no means reassure him. He placed no reliance in that strange composure.

"The rifle never failed me before," he resumed.

"This failure was due to a defective cartridge, I dare say," answered Eliakim.

"Arter that," explained the subordinate, with new trepidation, "I reckon I got excited."

"You were hunting new game, friend," kindly returned the Peacemaker.

"Yes, ruther."

Both men looked toward the balloon once more. It was going along in fine style. The current of air was brisk, and the lone voyager was every moment putting more ground between him and Hornets' Nest.

Uncle Honest sat down upon a rock, and as he rested his hands on his knees, they trembled greatly. The late scene had shaken him even more than Hickman suspected. In the first place the sight of Storm Rider engaged in such work was a startling surprise, for he had had the best of reasons for believing that the man was not in condition for active service of any kind; and then came the failure to stop the balloon. Now, it was drifting safely away, and Eliakim was filled with lively apprehensions as to what would be the aeronaut's next move.

If he told to the outside world all that he knew, even the iron rule of the Outerbridges would not serve to give safety to the head of the family.

Several minutes passed before Eliakim spoke or moved from the rock. He felt weak physically, and time was necessary to restore his strength and his disturbed nerves. He finally arose.

"I think, Hickman, that I will return to the village. I am not feeling very strong, and I don't know that I can do any good here. You may remain and continue to search for the Ormes. If you run upon one of my boys, report to him for orders."

"Thank ye, Uncle Honest. Excuse me, but I've an idee about that thar ballon critter."

"What is it?"

"Ain't he one o' the gang who took the Ormes away?"

"No; I am positive that he is not. Did you recognize him?"

"He looked like the critter the sheriff captured at the City Hall."

"It was he. I don't mind saying, Hickman, that he was left in my house, and that in escaping from it, he fell from the window and sustained severe injuries—so severe that he could not possibly have taken part in the rescue. No," added the Peacemaker, decisively; "I know it was not Storm Rider who took the Ormes away."

"I don't see who did it, then."

"Nor I," Eliakim admitted, with a thoughtful frown. "It is very mysterious, but I hope my dear boys will find the runaways before night. Now go to them, friend Hickman. Tell them I've returned to Hornets' Nest."

Uncle Honest waved his hand, smiled benevolently upon his subordinate, and then began his return. Hickman went the other way to find the younger Outerbridges.

CHAPTER XXVII.

PETER ASTONISHES HIS PARENT.

The day was drawing to a close when Doctor Mark and the mountaineer abandoned the

search for the Ormes and started for the village. The Outerbridge gang had given it up and gone home previously, and the smaller party had been compelled to follow their example.

There was no trace of the missing persons. That they had been taken to the hills by those well acquainted with the region was clear, but the skill of the unknown rescuer, together with the natural disadvantages of Sawtooth Ridge, had foiled even Yank's skill for the time. He did not yield wholly, but the fact was undeniable that there was thus far absolutely no clew.

During the day they had seen the Outerbridge searchers now and then, but no conversation had taken place. If hostility was felt, none was shown.

Nevermiss and Mark were about to emerge from the rougher country into the valley when they were surprised to see Peter Outerbridge coming toward them. From the first it impressed both men that he had a definite object in view, and Mark mentally inquired if an ambush was to be looked for by the way.

Peter, however, came on quietly, without any exhibition of hostility, and reaching them, stopped short.

"What luck?" he asked, calmly.

"Luck at what?" Hartley returned.

"Looking for the Ormes?"

"We have no idea where they are."

"Nobody has. I suppose you have heard the news at the village?"

"What news?"

"About the Grahams."

"What about them?" Hartley asked, uneasily.

"They are arrested."

"Arrested?"

"Yes."

"By whom? For what?"

"My worthy father, Mr. Outerbridge, believes that they were concerned in the rescue of the Ormes, and he has very properly had them incarcerated in the very cells occupied by Gun-nison Alf and Firefly Nell—alias, the Ormes. My father desired to maintain peace in Hornets' Nest and protect the people, for whom the town exists, and very fitly, too, from all violence and discords and turbulent elements, and possible contamination with disreputable and degenerate characters who may be in, or may be suspected of being in, its peaceful limits; and as his far-seeing, just and unfailing observation showed him that the Grahams were dangerous persons, no less by means of past offenses than what they are now suspected of, he wisely, though reluctantly, ordered the arrest, and they are now imprisoned as before said."

This prodigious sentence, which would have strangled almost any other man, fell smoothly and unctuously from Peter's lips. For insincerity he had usurped Uncle Honest's well-grounded position, and that person could not have maintained a sentence through so many long stretches as Peter had done.

Doctor Mark was dimly conscious of all this, but minor facts were swallowed up in the one important, painful fact of the arrest.

"This is unjust!" he exclaimed. "I am sure that the Grahams are wholly innocent."

"Perhaps they can prove it," responded Peter, looking at the sky absently.

"What could that weak old man and two women do?"

"Perhaps they are not guilty."

"I know they are not."

"Who is?" asked the Leather-Jacket, indifferently.

"I don't know, but—"

"Some suspect you."

"Me?"

"Yes."

"Absurd! I know nothing about it."

"I dare say my good father will talk with you—I am sure he will. Happily, doctor, you can rely upon his wisdom, magnanimity and mercy. Good-day, gentlemen!"

Peter bowed with calm dignity and walked on. He left two astonished men behind him. Mark and Yank watched in silence until he was out of sight; then they looked wonderingly at each other.

"What do you make of it?" demanded the doctor.

"I can't imagine why he did it," Yank returned.

"Do you think they are really arrested?"

"I consait so; but that ain't the mystery that is percolatin' through my mind. The question is, why in hurley did Peter tell us on't?"

"I am utterly at a loss to know."

"I consait he come hyar on purpose ter tell us."

"Why should he do that?"

"I haven't an artom o' an idee."

"He has not been so friendly before."

"Ef he's friendly now, he's got some selfish motive in it. You don't ketch him actin' from any other cause. Now see hyar—he tol' us we was ter be arrested, or that we was suspected, or somethin' o' the sort, didn't he?"

"Yes."

"An' he knowed that would put us on our guard?"

"Yes."

"Wal, why's Peter workin' ag'in' that parental ancestor he claims ter be so uncommon fond on?"

"Yank, I believe there is a deep plot here. What new hook has Uncle Honest baited for us?"

"Mark my words," replied Yank, leveling his forefinger at his companion, "the old man ain't in it; this is Peter's game, an' he's at it egregious brisk. Why? I kin only suspek 'tis on account o' Peggy, though why Peter's fancy fur her should extend ter us I don't know, by hurley!"

"He has some idee."

"He has, sure's you live; an' it's ragin' like malignant newrology, though it may not be so bad on the jints. We owe Peter some goodwill fur warnin' us, but it won't do ter imagine that angels' wings have sprouted under them big shoulders o' his. His pedigree wouldn't allow that. My advice is, keep a sharp eye on Peter or he'll get us inter some mortal triberlation yet."

"I believe you. And now we are to meet another question. Shall we go boldly to the village?"

"I consait that the hills are good enough fur us," dryly answered Nevermiss.

"Then here we stay; but what of the Grahams? Must they stay in prison?"

"I hate like the mischief ter hev them do so."

"Mountaineer, we are their only friends," resumed Hartley, with feeling.

"To be sure. We two men ag'in' a town, an' one on us is ruther past the prime o' life an' courtin'-time. You would size up as an able-bodied man, but I'm afflicted egregiously with newrology, an' my left foot is a coward—a mortal weak sister. Nothin' but my regard fur the glory o' the Yellowbird pedigree, an' the memory o' my gran'father, the Revolutionary relict, enables me ter keep up. By the way, doctor, I hev an idee."

"What is it?"

"Graham's folks don't want ter stay in jail an' I know it. Now, the chances are all ag'in' us, but I move that we hustle 'round, as soon as it's dark, an' see ef we kin rescue them."

"Are you in earnest?"

"To be sure."

"I am with you! Give me your hand!"

They crossed palms and the compact was sealed, but neither showed any enthusiasm. They knew very well how desperately the chances were against them, and it was only grim courage which actuated them. Confidence they did not, and could not, feel; and if they made the attempt, failed and were captured, they could expect no mercy from the ruling powers of the town.

In the mean time Peter had let no time go to waste. His conduct proved that he had sought them on purpose, for after leaving them, he made a half-circle at a rapid pace and then returned to the village. He went at once to his father's house, and found that worthy in his room.

Eliakim had already received a report from Isaac, so he had only to greet Peter. This he did in his usual fatherly manner, after which he added:

"Sit down, my dear boy; I want to talk with you."

"And I want to talk with you!"

Peter spoke steadily, and he looked at Uncle Honest with a firm, fixed intentness which indicated that he had something of importance to say, and plenty of courage with which to say it.

"I will hear you first, my son," graciously answered Eliakim, with a wave of his hand.

"I want to speak of the Grahams."

"Proceed, Peter."

"We have always run Hornets' Nest in the manner best suited to our own interests, haven't we?"

"To the interest of the people you mean, my boy."

"I accept your correction," calmly continued the young Leather-Jacket, "but I think you will admit the fact that, while looking out for the people, the Outerbridge family has never allowed itself to get very badly left. But we need not dwell upon that point; let us speak solely of the Grahams. They are prisoners, and I suppose you will deal rigorously with them."

"With the blessing of Providence I shall be unwaveringly just, my boy; but I fear their crimes will compel me to use some severity, as much as I shall regret the necessity."

"Exactly," coolly pursued Peter. "With your permission I will suggest a mode of punishment for one of them which will be novel and just."

"Explain it, by all means, Peter."

"Compel Peggy to marry me!"

The young Leather-Jacket uttered the words with precision almost machine-like, but Uncle Honest started back in blank amazement.

"What's that?" he demanded.

"I want to marry Peggy!"

"You do? You want to— Ha! ha! I see; you are joking, my boy. Very good; very good, but—"

"Wrong, father—wrong. I was never more

in earnest in my life. I've fancied Peggy ever since she came to Hornets' Nest, but I knew very well that she didn't fancy me. Now, things have changed, and I am in position to urge my claim with force, if need be. I'm determined to marry her, anyhow. I dare say I've astonished you, but Peggy will make you a charming daughter."

He ended his little speech, but the silence remained unbroken—Uncle Honest sat staring at him in dumfounded amazement, and, it seemed, utterly incapable of speech.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A STORM IN THE OUTERBRIDGE CAMP.

THERE was no room to doubt that the Peacemaker was astonished, and a less resolute person than Peter would have been disturbed by the expression on the old man's face. That face became rigid; his eyes seemed fixed, and they were certainly glassy; and it was clear that he was taking it more severely than was to be expected even by one who knew him as well as his son.

"You don't mean it, Peter!" he finally said, almost in a whisper. "You can't mean it."

"But I do, just the same. I fancy Peggy, and am going to marry her."

"But she is under our ban."

"I know it."

"It is too late to think of it."

"Our will is all-powerful here. No one will object if I marry her. Let the villagers try it if they dare!" and Peter held out one ponderous hand, firmly clenched.

"But Peggy is daughter of a train-wrecker—the once-notorious Garret Jeffreys."

"Never mind; I'm not thin-skinned."

"She is not your equal."

"I think she is."

"She will not consent to marry you."

"I will compel her."

Peter was meeting every objection with steady firmness which showed how much in earnest he was, and Uncle Honest saw that the cloud which had arisen was no trifling one. He braced himself to meet it. He was now fully himself, and he had not the least idea of humoring Peter's fancy. He was determined that Peggy should never come into his family, but, since Peter had taken such an unlucky fancy, it would be no more than right to deal with him as a hitherto-fore-obedient son deserved.

His voice was never milder than when he answered:

"But, my boy, it is my wish that you give her up."

"I am sorry to disappoint you, but I must refuse," Peter replied, firmly but respectfully.

"Remember, I am your father."

"I do remember."

"Bear in mind who the girl really is. Her name is, or was, Ursula Jeffreys, and her father was a train-robber who was killed on one of his raids. Surely, my son, you would not sully the Outerbridge honor by allying yourself with her."

"She is none the worse for what her father did, and she just suits me. Nobody but myself will have to marry her, and she is good enough for me. I'm sorry we don't agree, but you'll find Peggy will make you a dutiful daughter."

"Daughter!" cried Uncle Honest, with sudden bitterness. "I would as soon have a snake here!"

"I prefer the girl."

"Furies take the girl!"

"I prefer to take her myself."

"Boy," thundered Uncle Honest, "be careful how you speak. I am your father, and will not be insulted."

"Pray don't insult my future wife, then."

"How long since you took to giving orders to me?"

"I ain't giving any, and don't want it understood so, but you must remember that I am old enough to choose for myself. You have advised all your sons to marry—"

"Not to such a person as that girl. There are young women without number in the village who would make wives any man might be proud to have. Wilber, Peters, Maynard, Emmons, Grinnel—all have daughters whom I would welcome, but not the Jeffreys girl—not that one."

Uncle Honest showed a good deal of feeling, but he was trying to avoid severity. In his way he had a fatherly regard for Peter, and wished to convince him by mild measures that he was contemplating a serious mistake.

"Unfortunately," replied Peter, "she is just the one I have selected."

"My son, I want you to give her up."

"I shall have to say no. My mind has been fixed on her, as I said before, ever since she came to Hornets' Nest, but she showed plainly that she did not like me. Now she is where she can't use that flippant will of hers. She is a prisoner, and I can command, not request. I want her for my wife, and I want you to help me. Oblige me in this, and you will find me a more faithful aid than ever before."

"In what?"

"In all your plans."

"What plans shall I have then?"

"I don't understand."

"Do you know what would be the result of such a mad marriage?"

"You can tell me."

"We should lose all position and power here; the people would not follow those who had taken into their domestic circle the daughter of a train-wrecker. We have held our position here by means of our spotless integrity and respectability—"

Peter put out one hand.

"Don't!" he said, tersely.

"Don't what?" asked Uncle Honest, with a frown.

"Why not abandon that idle pretense here? You and I know, if the 'people' do not, how we have ruled Hornets' Nest. What has become of those who have opposed us? Ask the depths of the mountain pools and the heart of the sand in the lonely gulches—"

Eliakim had vainly commanded silence with a gesture. He now laid hold of Peter's arm, and his grasp was painful even to the muscular Leather-Jacket. The old man's eyes were flashing, and his face had grown pale.

"Be still!" he hissed; "be still, or, by Heaven! I will forget that you are my son and strike you dead at my feet! How dare you!—how dare you speak of those things?"

His huge form was quivering with rage, and it was plain that his was no idle threat, but Peter's nature was too fearless and stoical to admit of alarm. He retained his calmness, and made no effort to throw off the painful grasp on his arm, but Uncle Honest stepped back a few paces and surveyed him with bitter emotion which was a mixture of grief, disappointment and anger.

"This from my son!" he uttered, unsteadily, and with a degree of pathos.

"Come," replied Peter, quietly, "you don't do me justice. I am not reproaching you, or quarreling with the chances that have given me, as well as you, ease and power; I only wished to remind you of facts. Our way is all right, but don't let us get too strict; don't let us attack Peggy."

"Curse the girl!"

"Father, you are severe."

"Why shouldn't I be? The idea of your daring to fancy that girl!"

Peter began to lose his temper.

"The girl is all right," he doggedly returned.

"You must give her up."

"I decline."

"Boy, will you defy my authority?"

"Not in matters of business, but I must be allowed to marry to suit myself."

"You must?"

"Come, I don't want to quarrel," sulkily answered the younger man, "but you are pressing me too hard."

"You would make me a nonentity."

"What would you make me?"

"I would have you give up that girl, and, by Judas! you shall. Words enough have been waited, and I will now talk to the point. You must give her up. She is very much disliked here, and by no one more than Mrs. Charity Potter, a most exemplary lady who is a good judge of other women. If the Jeffreys girl came into our family we should lose the respect of the people, and with it would go our authority. You know as well as I do how important it is that we rule here awhile longer. Hornets' Nest is a small place, but by my peculiar mode of financial proceeding we are getting rich. The property we have confiscated nets a handsome sum. In the treasury are numerous papers which seem to represent, and hold to the town, all the confiscated property, but they are not worth a straw. Really, the money is all in Denver banks, in my name. Shall we give up this easy mode of getting rich?"

"It is not necessary—"

"It is, if this marriage goes on."

"Well, we are not beggars, now."

"We!" You forget that the money all stands in my name."

"No, but I am your son—"

"How would you like to be a beggar?"

"It would not be pleasant, but—"

"Marry that girl and not a cent of my money shall ever be yours!"

Uncle Honest struck his clinched hand upon his knee and glared savagely at his son. He no longer had the appearance of a "Peacemaker;" his anger had torn away the mask of years, and he allowed his passions full play.

"You would disinherit me, eh?" asked Peter, slowly.

"Most certainly I would!" Eliakim declared.

"Suppose I should develop a revengeful trait?" quietly answered the Leather-Jacket.

"Suppose I should get square by giving away our mutual secrets?"

The Peacemaker drew himself erect, and the expression on his face was most ferocious.

"Would you do that?" he asked, in a tense voice.

"I did not say so."

"If you *did* do it," Uncle Honest deliberately replied, "you would seal your own fate. Were you a hundred times my son you should die like a cur!"

Resolute as he was, Peter wavered a little be-

fore this bitter threat, but Eliakim almost immediately added:

"No, no; it will never come to that. The Outerbridges will not turn against each other. Don't let us speak of it. Let the matter rest for now, Peter—we will both take time to think. We ought not to—we must not quarrel. There has never been a break between me and my sons. Let it not begin now. Give me your hand, Peter!"

His manner had entirely changed, and he was again himself. He actually managed to smile. Peter gave his hand, but both men knew that the trouble was not so easily mended. The rebellion against his authority was a severe blow to Uncle Honest, and Pete was doggedly determined to persist in his intentions.

The trouble was put aside for the time, but as the younger man went out it was apparent that the old relations were seriously changed. The future did not promise to restore harmony.

CHAPTER XXIX.

KNIFE BELT REVEALS A STARTLING SECRET.

WHEN Eliakim Outerbridge was once more alone he revealed in another way the keen disappointment of Peter's rebellion. He cared for his sons to such a degree that he had regarded them as far superior to other young men, but there was so little real tenderness about it that, in case one of them opposed himself to his father, the latter could have ordered him to doom without any great sorrow.

Left alone, the old man saw only too plainly that the harmony of the Outerbridge family was threatened, and there lay his chief grief. They had previously been so well in accord that one mind directed them all; Uncle Honest had only to give one order and it would be obeyed. With his shrewd, crafty and fertile mind to scheme, and their ability, unscrupulousness and physical strength to execute, they had constituted a power; and Eliakim had hoped that they would go on in the same harmony, achieving new honors and acquiring new power.

The rebellion of the youngest brother, consequently, was a severe blow, and as the scheming old man saw his dearest hopes menaced he experienced disappointment most acute.

He arose and began to pace the room excitedly.

"Peter must yield!" he muttered. "He must! he must! It is true he would be but one lost, but once let the defection begin and my power would wane. The trouble must be checked at the start. Peter must give up the girl; he shall give her up! I'll see him again and talk more fully; I'll present logical reasons to him which he cannot defy. His is only a passing fancy; I'll cure him of it, and marry him off to Huldah Emmons or Sarah Wilber—anybody but the girl, Peggy. Her he shall give up, or he will be my son no longer. I'll drive him out; I'll deprive him of all share in my property; and if he betrays our secrets—if he *dares* betray them!—so much the worse for him!"

The Peacemaker clasped his hands nervously, and his wrinkled face worked strangely.

"Isaac and Aaron would still be left," he continued. "My brave, devoted boys! No danger of their defection. They have no foolish fancy for the train-wrecker's daughter. Noble boys! Keen of mind and quick of action, with the forms of Hercules! Ha! they are left to me!—they will not fail me!"

Now his hands were rubbed together with intense satisfaction, and his face lighted up with a fatherly pride.

"My noble boys!" he repeated, finding great satisfaction in dwelling on the words.

For several minutes he paced the floor, and then a knock sounded at the door. The applicant was a hard-featured colored woman who had been his housekeeper for many years. She had come to deliver a note, and when it was done she retired. Eliakim opened the paper and read as follows:

"DEAR UNCLE HONEST:—I ain't done nothin' that I 'otter be shut up four, an' I would like too get out. I am a innocent Boy, an' if you will let me Out, I will go Away an' never come back. If anybody has hurt you it wa'n't me, an' I find prison life wearing on my health. I'm a fraid I have Symptoms uv smallpocks, an' I never hurt you anyway. I feel pretty bad, an' you ain't got a better friend than I Bee. I tolled awl I new befour, But have heard something elctis sence which will be no Grate importance to you. I shall be glad to tell you Awl if you will let me out uv prison. Pleez a'point a place uv meeting Most convenience to you, an oblige yore humble servance an' admyrer.

KNIFE BELT.

"P. S. You ain't got a better friend than I Bee, an' I shoold Hate to be sik heer with smallpocks. Pleez konsider it."

Uncle Honest had some trouble in deciphering this epistle, for the penmanship was not much better than the spelling; and when he had read to the end, he was not quite sure how to regard Knife Belt. He determined to see him, however; if the boy had "something elctis" to tell, he wish to hear it.

He wrote an order for the boy to be brought to his house, and then called the colored woman and gave it to her.

Twenty minutes elapsed, and then Knife Belt appeared, in charge of Aaron Outerbridge. The boy looked smaller than ever by the side of

the massive Leather-Jacket, and his face was woebegone; but there was nothing to indicate that he was afflicted with small-pox. If this little fiction on his part had been necessary, he would have overreached himself; he had named the trouble of which he had the greatest awe, without being able to comprehend how absurd he was making himself.

Uncle Honest directed him to take a chair, and then abruptly added:

"So you have something to tell me?"

"Yes, sir," said Knifebelt, meekly.

"About what?"

"The Ormes, sir."

"I thought you claimed to have told all you knew."

"I did, then, but while they was in prison I overheard them talking."

"Ah! I remember your room was next to theirs. Well, I will hear what you have to say."

"Will you let me go afterwards?"

"Where do you want to go?"

"Back East."

"You don't like the West, eh?"

"No, I don't."

"If I let you go you may try to kick up a row, and prejudice people against Hornets' Nest."

"I won't say a word to anybody, and I'll get away as quick as I can. I've got into trouble enough along of the Ormes, and I don't want no more of them."

The boy spoke with emphasis, and Outerbridge was satisfied that he told the truth.

"If you can reveal enough to deserve it, you shall go free," he answered.

"I can tell you just who the Ormes are."

"Indeed! Now you are coming to the point. Well, let me hear what you know."

"I could hear them talk in prison," said Knifebelt. "The wall was thin and had cracks between the boards. I got one ear up to it and listened, and when Joseph and Vashti talked, I heard part. I tried to catch what they had been running away from, and I did it. 'Twas officers of the law!"

The boy paused, and looked at Eliakim wisely.

"Proceed!" the latter directed.

"Joseph had worked in a bank somewhere—I think it was Chicago, for they spoke of it often—and he got into business trouble. He loaned money to a friend and put a mortgage on their house—his and Vashti's—thinking the friend would pay up so he could clear off the mortgage. The friend didn't do it, though, and the other man was going to foreclose on the mortgage."

"The idea of losing his house made Joseph wild, and he forged some kind of paper and got money at the bank. With this he paid off the mortgage, but he was in even a worse fix. The forged paper was in the bank, and if it was not got out of sight in two weeks the forgery would be discovered. Joseph tried every way he could to raise money, but he didn't do it. He had had a false key made to the bank, as a last resort, and on the last night of the two weeks he used it."

"He went to the bank and got in with the false key, and got the forged paper; but just as he was leaving, some one discovered him. I didn't find out whether it was a policeman, or somebody who worked in the bank; but Joseph was so scared that he drew a revolver and fired to scare the man. Joseph didn't mean to hurt anybody, but he did—the man fell over on the floor, dead!"

"Joseph was scared out of his senses, and he locked up the bank and ran away. He couldn't see any way to do but to leave the city, and he went right to Vashti and told her what he had done. She fainted, but when she came to she declared she would leave town with him. She did, and they started West; but when they got to some place out here they saw Joseph's name as the murderer of the man in the bank, and they kept on running."

"I heard them say they hadn't ought to have given their name at all, out this way; though it seems it wa'n't really their own name. Their father took it about the time Joseph was born, for he inherited some money on condition he changed his name from Rodrickton to Orme."

Uncle Honest made a violent start.

"From what?" he demanded.

"Rodrickton."

"Was their father named that?"

"Yes, sir; so they said—Maurice Rodrickton. That is their real name, but everybody knows them by the name of Orme."

"Aaron," uttered Eliakim, in a hollow voice, as he turned to his son, "did you come here alone?"

"Stovey is outside."

"Send the boy back to prison by him—at once!"

Knifebelt looked alarmed.

"But, sir, you haven't told me—"

"Silence, you idiot!" hoarsely commanded the Peacemaker; "I will deal with you as I see fit. Take him away, Aaron, and then come back to me."

"All right."

Other expostulations were on Knifebelt's lips, but the burly Leather-Jacket laid hold of him with one hand, lifted him from the chair and dragged him unceremoniously out of the room. Aaron had been startled by his father's manner and expression, and he had no sooner delivered the boy to the man outside than he returned to Uncle Honest.

Greatly to his surprise he found the old man sitting in a chair and laughing almost hysterically. The sight brought the deputy-sheriff to a standstill, and for a moment he was speechless. Then he began to fear that his father had lost his mind.

"Great heavens!" he exclaimed, "what is the matter?"

Uncle Honest made an effort and succeeded in calming himself.

"Good news is the matter," he replied.

"I don't understand."

"I presume not, but I do. I've heard the most remarkable news of my life—though I ought to have suspected when I found out who Storm Rider was. I didn't suspect, and the revelation came like a thunderbolt. Ha! ha! fate is playing into my hands strangely, and my triumph will be even more glorious than I anticipated. All things come to him who waits, somebody has said, and I reckon there is something in it; a glorious triumph is coming to me—ay, and sweet revenge, too!"

CHAPTER XXX.

PEGGY MAKES A REQUEST.

UNCLE HONEST was in a highly exultant mood, but his manner showed that he was again the level-headed man who had so long and ably directed the fortunes of the Leather-Jackets.

"I am glad you are pleased," observed Aaron, "but I haven't the least idea why."

"Did you hear the boy tell the real name of the Ormes?"

"Yes; but I don't remember it."

"Rodrickton."

"That conveys nothing to my mind."

"But it does to mine. It takes me back further than your day, my boy; to the days when I knew Maurice Rodrickton, their father. So he had his name legally changed, it seems. It is not strange that I failed to recognize the name of 'Orme,' but their faces ought to have given me a clew—though I did not know him well, and her looks are not there."

The speaker's voice had grown low and mechanical, for his mind was not on the present, but he suddenly aroused.

"Aaron," he added with energy, "the Ormes must be found."

"Most certainly," the Leather-Jacket agreed.

"There is still no clew?"

"I'm afraid not; I know of none."

"My boy, I want you to move heaven and earth to find them."

"Rest easy, sir," answered Aaron, with a nod of confidence; "they will not long be at liberty. We are after them sharp, and we are going to have them."

"I cannot imagine who took them away."

"I still suspect Storm Rider."

"Then suspect him no longer, for I know him to be innocent. That man's real name is Hendricks, and I knew him when we were both young—not intimately, but casually. He recognized me when we met here, and when I knew who he was I decided that he was a dangerous man. I had him left in this house, but not long did he stay. I took him away at the muzzle of a revolver; I compelled him to go to the hills; and in a canyon I fell upon him and beat him senseless. I thought he was dead, and I threw his body into a crevice and covered it over with bushes and sand. I had only my hands with which to work, and it seems that the man came out of his grave alive; but I know he had not the amount of life necessary to rescue the Ormes."

"That disposes of him, then."

"It certainly does. Now, who else could it have been?"

It was the inquiry of perplexity, and Uncle Honest neither expected a definite answer nor received one. Aaron shook his head and admitted that he was at fault.

"Do you think they are still in the hills?"

"Yes," the Leather-Jacket replied. "That is about all I am sure of, but do feel positive that they are hiding in some cave there. Sawtooth Ridge is a bad place to follow a trail, but we are bound to have them; and when they are taken, it will be a good idea to string whoever helped them away up by the neck at once."

"That's a fact, Aaron; and that reminds me of Yank Yellowbird. I am sure he had no part in the rescue, but I'm afraid of that man."

"Nonsense, father! Arrest him!—shoot him!—anything to wipe him out promptly."

"That is easier said than done. He is a borderer of life-long experience, and the whole West bears testimony to his shrewdness and bravery. The Indians call him 'Nevermiss,' and it is generally said that he never fails to bring ruin to those he works against."

"All superstition, father—not that I contradict you; I refer only to rumor. Nevermiss is human, and a bullet will settle him. Better order his death at once."

"I'll do it to-morrow, Aaron. I'm glad to see you're not afraid of the homely mountaineer."

"Not I!" declared Aaron, putting out his brawny arm.

"You're a brave boy, Aaron, and a good boy. I'm proud of you. I hope you'll never turn against your old father?"

The Peacemaker had remembered rebellious Peter, and there was sudden anxiety in his manner.

"Turn against you!" echoed Aaron. "Well, I should say not. As far as the duty of a son to his father is concerned, I'd rather practice than preach it; but self-interest, if nothing more, teaches me wisdom. The Outerbridges must pull together, shoulder to shoulder, without a selfish motive. United we stand; divided, we fall!"

Uncle Honest's eyes beamed with pleasure.

"That's the sort, Aaron!" he exclaimed; "you've got a good bit of the old man's horse-sense. You're the kind of a man I like to see. I'm proud of you, Aaron. Good, clear head, and muscles a gladiator might envy. I don't know where other boys could be found like you and Isaac."

"And Peter," suggested Aaron.

"Ye-es, and Peter."

Uncle Honest spoke gingerly, but, as he was not inclined to let any one know of the youngest brother's fall from grace, more briskly added:

"Right good boys, all of you. Don't forget what the old man has done for you, Aaron; 'twas Uncle Honest brought you up in the way you should go. His eyes have been over you from the start. Yes, yes; and it was I who picked out good old Scriptural names for you to bear."

"We're all fully aware how much we owe you, father, and you'll find us ready to back you against the world at any time."

The Leather-Jacket put out his hand, and a hearty pressure was exchanged. Business was over, and Aaron walked to the City Hall. Knifebelt had been returned to his prison-room in a downcast, sulky state. He considered himself an ill-used person to be thus incarcerated as soon as he had told his story to Outerbridge. Surely, as complete a history of the Ormes as he had given deserved some reward—and it had come in the shape of a return to captivity.

Isaac was pacing to and fro in the court-room in a restless manner, and his broad, dark face was even more grim, somber and surly than usual. Plainly, he was in ill humor.

"How goes it, Isaac?" inquired Aaron, in a genial way.

"Nothing new," was the curt reply.

"The Grahams haven't escaped, have they?"

"Bet your life they haven't!" savagely replied the elder brother.

"We must set a strong watch to-night."

"I'm watch enough!" declared Isaac, fiercely.

"You don't mean to send the men away—"

"Nothing of the kind," Isaac interrupted; then, after looking scowlingly at the corner of the room, and working his fingers nervously around the hilt of his knife, he added in a deep voice: "To-night I shall not sleep."

"Why not let me or Peter watch here? You need rest. You would not have fallen asleep, and slept so soundly last night, if you hadn't been worn out."

The moody Leather-Jacket raised his grim face to look at his brother.

"You are very good to find an excuse for me."

"I only use common-sense judgment."

"Worn out!" repeated Isaac, with a short laugh. "Very good! The devil always suggests an excuse for his children, and I'm obliged to you for finding one for me, Aaron—not meaning that you are Old Nick, or anything of the sort, brother. Yes, I was worn out; that's it."

Again the short laugh, and Isaac was fast growing mysterious when one of the men approached the Leather-Jackets.

"The girl has somethin' ter say," he announced.

"Peggy?"

"Yes."

"What does she want?"

"Leave ter go ter the house fur somethin'."

"What does she want there?"

"I don't know. I tol' her you would prob'ly send fur the articles ef you thought 'em necessary; but she 'lowed that wouldn't do. She said she needed sartain things an' only she could git them. Said she wa'n't goin' ter have no 'heathen man' fumblyin' over her pussional effects."

"You tell her she can't go. A pretty idea, indeed, to have a prisoner running about to get a few nonsensical articles."

"Wait a bit, brother," said a mild voice.

Isaac turned, and saw Peter.

"I'll go with the girl to Graham's, if she wants," added the youngest Leather-Jacket, carelessly. "There is no harm in a woman; and I'll take Post and Greene along to guarantee that she don't get away."

Isaac Outerbridge did not know of the trouble between his brother and his father, but he looked at Peter suspiciously. As has before been said, he suspected the existence of a fancy on Peter's

part for Peggy, but he did not know how serious it was. His active suspicions, and nothing more, caused him to look with disfavor on this proposal.

"Why are you so anxious?" he asked, gruffly.

"I am not anxious," returned Peter, quietly; "but as the girl has asked for a very simple favor, it will do no harm to grant it. Remember, she is a woman."

"I do remember it. A woman!" echoed Isaac, with a sneer. "All the trouble in the world comes from women. Men, and homes, and empires, owe their ruin to women. Where woman goes, mischief stalks along by her side."

"In this case I'll stalk along by her side," lightly replied the youngest brother. "Don't make a mountain out of a mole-hill; I reckon that Post, Greene, and I can take care of one woman. If we can't, we'll raise a racket and alarm the village. What say, brother?"

If Isaac had said what he wished to he would have put a prompt, absolute veto on the idea; but Peter had rights as well as he. No question of superiority had ever been raised, and the brothers had acted as one. Had it not been for the suspicion in the elder man's mind he would have trusted Peter as readily as himself.

"Have your own way," he growled.

"All right, brother," was the light reply.

"I'll see the damsel at once."

He went to Peggy. She occupied the room before given to Vashti, while Cyrus Graham and his wife had Joseph's. Peter went in and nodded pleasantly.

"I understand that you want to go home for a few things?"

"Yes," Peggy replied, doubtfully.

"All right; get ready at once."

Peggy was agreeably surprised, but she lost no time in obeying. She had only to throw on her hat to make ready. When she saw that Peter was to be her escort she did not look in any degree pleased, but as the other two men were to go along she made no objection. Peter was extremely quiet. He saw that Isaac was watching suspiciously, and was too wise to take any risk.

He grew exhilarated, however, when once clear of the house. At last he had the privilege of walking by Peggy's side. It was a check on his satisfaction to remember that she was a prisoner, but it was something to be near the woman whose very presence brought him a thrill which he, with his phlegmatic mind, did not take the trouble to analyze; but which came as near genuine affection as was possible with him.

Post and Greene had fallen back a few paces, and the young couple were practically alone.

"I hope you don't blame me because you're a prisoner," said Peter, in a low voice.

"Who is to blame?"

"The authorities decided on the step. When I knew of the intention I was very sorry, and you know that I knocked Dodge down when he laid rough hands upon you. Since then I have formally asked my father to release you."

"What did he say?"

"He answered evasively," replied Peter, grimly oblivious, for the time, of the facts, and of Uncle Honest's violent conduct. "He opposed me at first, but when I declared that it was not right to imprison you, who had done no harm, my good father said he would think of it. I will see him again, and do my very best for you."

CHAPTER XXXI.

PEGGY FACES A CRISIS.

THE Leather-Jacket spoke earnestly, but Peggy did not experience either hope or relief. Peter's devotion to her interests proceeded from a cause well understood by her; it was purely selfish, and she felt that she would rather be a prisoner than near him.

"I don't see any reason why I should be shut up," she answered, evasively.

"Nor I," Peter declared.

"The same remark will apply to Cyrus Graham and his wife."

"Ye-es," Peter agreed, hesitatingly.

"Uncle Honest ought to let us all leave Hornets' Nest, without molestation."

"Perhaps he will."

The young man did not speak with visible confidence, but arrival at Graham's house interrupted conversation. Peter directed Post and Greene to stay outside, and he and Peggy entered. She lit the lamp in the kitchen, and then told her companion to remain there while she went to her room.

Left alone, Peter's mind became active. When he volunteered to escort the girl he had no motive except to gain her favor, and this he intended to do not only by the mere act of allowing her to visit the house, but by the most crafty language he could command. The present situation, however, suggested other plans to him. Why should Peggy return to prison?

Uncle Honest had opposed him stoutly, stubbornly, and Peter knew him well enough to be aware that the chance of his yielding was about one in fifty. Why should he take Peggy back to the City Hall, only to have Uncle Honest

persistently refuse to give her to him? Why not take her away at once, while he could?

So far as he knew, there was no obstacle—if she agreed. Post and Greene dared not refuse. He was as much their master as were his older brothers; only the authority of Uncle Honest was superior to his. If he prevailed with Peggy they could at once leave Hornets' Nest, and, mounted on the pick of the village horses, defy pursuit.

He determined to make the effort.

He heard Peggy descending the stairs and awaited her arrival with considerable anxiety. She appeared with a small package.

"Have you become impatient?" she asked.

"Not in the least," he replied.

"I am ready, now."

"There is no haste; I want to speak with you first—in fact, I hate to have you go back to prison."

"I hate to go."

"You need not unless you want to."

Dim as was the suggestion, Peggy suspected what was coming.

"Your father would have something to say about that."

"Just at present there is no one to raise a voice but you and me. We need consider no one else; and, for that matter, it is best that we should not. We can hope for no one on our side. The people of Hornets' Nest are unjustly and bitterly opposed to you, and it is no idle statement when I say that I am your only friend here."

Peter was speaking rapidly, and Peggy knew that an avowal was at hand. She tried to speak—to check him—but he went on without pause.

"From the time that you first came to this village I admired you, Peggy, and the feeling grew upon me. I saw in you a bright, intelligent, pretty girl, and you seemed to be all that a woman should be. Days passed, and I liked you more and more, and I found you connected with every plan I had for the future. I'm a plain man, Peggy, and I can't tell all this in fine language, but I learned to love you—I did, Peggy; and I love you now!"

The girl tried her best to interrupt.

"But—"

He went on rapidly, heedless of her monosyllable.

"It is an outrage for you to be imprisoned—you who have done no harm to any one. With my consent, you shall not go back to City Hall. Peggy, I love you; I want you for my wife. Say that you will marry me, and the dawn of day shall find us many miles away. We will leave here at once and forever, and those who rule Hornets' Nest shall never influence our slightest action; they shall never see us again. I have money, and I will buy us a nice little home wherever you want to go, and we'll begin life anew. Peggy—Peggy, tell me that you will go!"

Peter had grown eloquent. He found words which, in themselves, were to the point, and he so endowed them with the living fire of vehemence, subdued to a proper degree; and with many a sweeping gesture, and with the rapid play of his expression, and with his own rapt interest, that the plain Leather-Jacket was transformed.

No woman could have asked for an avowal more thrilling, or more indicative of sincerity; and had she who listened looked with favor on his suit, his declaration would have carried all before it.

But Peggy did not look upon it with favor; she had tried to interrupt, and when she did get a chance, her adverse reply was made with abrupt decision.

"Indeed, I will not go!" she exclaimed; "not as your wife. What are you thinking of, Peter Outerbridge? Do you suppose I would purchase my freedom?"

"Call it what you will—I only ask for a favorable reply," Peter declared.

"You can't have it. I wouldn't dream of such a thing."

"As what?"

"To marry you."

"Then you refuse?"

"Most certainly."

"Don't be hasty. Remember the City Hall prison."

"I do remember it, and it isn't pleasant, but there are worse things. I am very much obliged to you, Mr. Outerbridge"—Peggy was recovering prudence—"but I shall have to decline the honor. I wish, though, that you would help me away and not ask me to marry you."

"What would be my reward for betraying my father?"

The Leather-Jacket's voice was stern, but he was controlling himself better than was to be expected. He had expected an unfavorable reply, and was well aware that violence would not help matters.

"You would have the satisfaction of doing a good deed," Peggy returned.

"And the dissatisfaction of giving up everything for nothing," Peter retorted, practically.

"I cannot believe you are so hard-hearted—"

"I am," interrupted Peter, grimly. "I am sincere with you, Peggy, but I am going to consider my own interests, as well as yours. It

would be a foolish man who would jump off a precipice just because a woman told him it would please her."

"You needn't jump for me," retorted Peggy.

"Are you willing to go back to prison?"

"Yes; let us go at once!"

Peter did not stir. He was not at all sure that she would go back, anyway. Uncle Honest had declared that she should never become Peter's wife, while the latter had declared that she should. She had refused to marry him willingly, and this had brought him face to face with the only alternative—a forced marriage.

What better chance would he have than to seize her at once, procure horses, and flee with her as his unwilling companion? In a short time he could put a hundred miles between them and Hornets' Nest, and in some lonely place, which he could easily find, there would be no one to help Peggy, or to take her from him.

Thoughts like these were occupying his time, but they were abruptly interrupted. A new voice suddenly broke the brief silence.

"Don't be in a hurry!"

Both Peter and Peggy turned quickly, and then a glad cry burst from the latter's lips. They were no longer alone in the room; Doctor Hartley and Yank Yellowbird stood within ten feet of them. Peggy darted to the mountaineer's side.

"Oh! Yank!—dear old Yank!" she exclaimed, heaven has sent you here! I am so glad to see you!"

She threw her arms around his neck, while he laid his left hand upon her head. The other held his long rifle, and he did not remove his gaze from the dumfounded Leather-Jacket. Doctor Mark, too, was watching warily, but Peter did not make the hostile movement they thought possible. On the contrary, after the first shock of surprise, he showed little evidence of disappointment.

"We're around, little woman!" quoth Nevermiss, gently. "Land o' Goshen! ye didn't think we'd gone out o' sight like a taller candle, did ye? Didn't s'pose we'd desert ye in your hour o' affliction, did ye? That ain't the way o' the Yellowbirds—no; nor of the doctor, neither. It would blot our pedigree like the mischief ef we did go back on ye."

"I didn't think you would," Peggy answered, releasing her hold; "but I didn't think to see you here."

"We consaited somethin' might be goin' on, an' we thought we'd drop in hyar awhile."

"Were you here when we came in?"

"Ev'ry minute o' the time."

"Then you heard all I said?" quietly asked Peter.

"I admit we did, neighbor."

"I leave it to you to say if I haven't done my duty."

Yank caressed his beard in a dignified way. He read the Leather-Jacket well, and estimated him at his proper worth, but he was far from being disposed to anger one who might yet prove a powerful ally.

"You didn't do a tall bad," he responded, with an air of great frankness; "not a tall bad. You showed that you had mortal good judgment, an' I das'say Peggy 'preciated yer kindness. 'Twas a frien'ly offer, by hurley!"

"I repeat it now," Peter steadily continued.

"You are the young lady's friend, and I shall be glad to have you along. If she will accept my offer, we will all be out of Hornets' Nest in half an hour."

"To be sure. Matrimony is an article I don't know much about, but I've heard that it is generally regarded as a peaceful an' harmless occupation, ef the implicated parties don't get hostile. The only thing I know ag'in' it is that, whar'as I'm a bachelor, all my ancestors was married men from Adam down, an' thar ain't one on 'em alive. I won't say matrimony killed 'em, though my gran'father's brother, Elmathan Yellowbird, 'casionally got a black eye as a present from his wife. She was on-common handy with her fists, an' no woman in town could thrash her. I don't want ter pre-j'dice ye, Peter, an' it's fur Peggy ter answer."

"And my answer," replied the girl, "is the same as before. I must decline to accept Mr. Outerbridge's offer!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

BEYOND THE REACH OF HOPE.

PEGGY was growing bolder, with two such stout defenders as the mountaineer and Doctor Mark at hand, but even she was aware that matters were in a very complicated state.

Would her friends attempt to save her? Would Peter willingly let her go? If he was disposed to, could he manipulate the two guards outside the door? There were these questions and many others, and nobody felt sure of his footing, metaphorically speaking. The next hour was likely to bring important changes, but what they would be, nobody knew.

Peter was persistent.

"I think you are foolish, Peggy," he replied, argumentatively. "Ask these gentlemen if I am not your friend. Men, didn't I warn you of the arrest of the Grahams?"

"You sartainly did," Nevermiss admitted.

"That was because there was an order out for your arrest, too. It would have been executed had you come here before dark. I saved you because you were Peggy's friends. I've helped her all I can, and I'm ready to do more. Marry me, Peggy, and freedom shall be yours."

"Thank you very much, but I must decline," she returned. "Don't force me to repeat this again, please. We may as well understand each other right away. You are kind, Mr. Outerbridge, but, once and for all, I positively must decline to become your wife."

The Leather-Jacket's face did not change.

"So be it, then," he answered. "Prepare to return to your quarters at City Hall."

"What if I don't want to?"

"I am once more an officer of Hornets' Nest. It is my duty to take you back, and I shall not neglect it."

"Can't we induce ye ter change your mind?" inquired the mountaineer.

"No. I would have been your ally if the girl had allowed it, but she would not. When you and I first met, Yellowbird, we had a quarrel. I felt bitter toward you, and I would never have entered up the truce now existing only for Peggy. She has seen fit to throw me over, and the truce is off. I seek no quarrel with you, but no more friendly warnings will you get from me. I am again the deputy-sheriff of this town."

Peter spoke with cold resolution, but they were not satisfied. Doctor Mark, who had remained silent thus far, now began an argument, but the Leather-Jacket stopped him at once.

"Say no more," he directed; "the girl goes back to prison!"

At that moment a well-known voice was heard outside—the voice of Uncle Honest. It acted like magic upon Peter, and he sprung to the door and assumed a listening attitude. He need not have taken that trouble, for the words which followed were distinctly audible to all in the room.

"Where are they now?" came in Eliakim's voice, but with a sharp, stern utterance.

"Inside," replied one of the guards.

"Have you watched at the rear?"

"No, sir."

"Then in all human probability, the birds are flown. The game has been well planned, and you are left to watch an empty house. Isaac, enter the house, and let us know the worst."

During this conversation Peter had not been idle. He had turned the key in the door, and he now spoke quickly to Yank and Hartley.

"Quick!" he exclaimed. "Place the big box against the door—yes, and the stove—the table—anything to make a barricade!"

The door was tried from the outside, but it did not yield.

"Break it in!" ordered Uncle Honest.

A heavy form was dashed against the obstacle, but Peter's powerful shoulder was set against the inner side, and it was unavailing. By this time Yank and Mark were ready with the box—an unwieldy affair made of slabs split by Graham from a solid tree—it was duly placed as a barricade.

It was evident that Peter had not been sincere when he declared his intention of taking Peggy back to the City Hall, or he would not have made a movement toward resistance. He had not yet gone so far that his conduct could not have been plausibly explained, but, quiet as he was, he was determined not to give Peggy up. She was clear of the City Hall; if she went back she might never be in his grasp again.

He had determined to fight for her; to oppose his father and brothers to the end, however bitter that might be. It was a mad idea, yet he was not going into it in momentary passion. He had never been cooler. He had decided to risk his life, and regarded it as the business of nobody but himself. He hoped to escape without a severe fight, but if this was forced upon him, he hoped to cut his way through.

In any case he had coolly, deliberately put his life in jeopardy to achieve his object—to possess Peggy—and he had enough of the bulldog resolution of the Outerbridges not to falter for a moment.

The men outside were still trying to force the door, but it did not yield in the least. Then Uncle Honest was heard to order them to desist.

"If they are in the house we have everything in our own hands," he added, "and we need not worry. Have the house surrounded, Isaac, and make sure that nobody leaves secretly. Then we will give attention to the windows. They will not resist us."

Doctor Mark turned anxiously to Yank.

"What is to be done?" he asked.

"Fight!" tersely answered Peter.

"That is all well enough, but how will it end? They can call the whole village to their aid."

"I am not to be taken alive!" announced young Outerbridge, with desperate calmness.

"Unhappily, our death will not save Peggy."

"It will be a costly victory for them."

With these words Peter cast off his coat. This left no impediment to the free action of his arms but the loose flannel shirt he wore, and it revealed the magnificent proportions of his

body, his shoulders and his arms in a way calculated to excite the deepest admiration. He was rushing headlong to doom, but he had the grandeur of a wounded grizzly succumbing to its foes. Never while life lasted would those with him in the room forget the spectacle he made. He had deliberately turned against those with whom he had served all the years of his misguided life, but his calmness was unshaken in the face of the danger he was daring.

Lawless criminal that he was, he aroused pity in Peggy's mind.

"Go!" she exclaimed. "Your place is not here. Go to your brethren!"

"I shall never go to them; they can come to me when I am finished!" he resolutely replied.

"Girl, you think that you know these men, but I know them better. You had better not fall into their hands alive. Here! take this revolver, and seek the tender mercy of its contents!"

He extended the weapon, but Peggy grew pale at the thought, and shrunk back.

"No, no!" she gasped.

"I have a good mind—"

Thus far spoke the Leather-Jacket, and his gaze was bent on her, with a wild light in his eyes. He half-raised the revolver, but Doctor Mark caught his hand.

"Madman! what would you do?" Hartley cried.

"It would be mercy to her."

"Would you stain your hands with such a crime?"

"All here are doomed. I know Eliakim Outerbridge and his way. We who are men can die fighting, but that chance is denied her. Have your own way, though; I shall look only to myself now."

"Do you really mean to fight against them?"

"I do."

"Yet you think they will kill you?"

"I know it. I have fair warning from Eliakim Outerbridge; he told me what he would do if I turned against them, and he knows now that I have done it. The whole thing is settled, but they have not silenced me yet!"

He looked to his revolvers, and stood ready for work.

Yank Yellowbird had been the silent man of the party. While the others talked he thought, and it must be confessed that he found the prospect too dark to admit one ray of light. He knew that when the assault came they could hold the house only a very brief time. There were more windows on the lower floor than they had men, and the storming would soon be over. If they stayed to face the attack, they would at last be compelled to fight like cornered rats, and die in a fight against overwhelming odds.

He suddenly aroused.

"There is only one way ter do!" he exclaimed.

"What is that?" demanded Hartley.

"Make a dash fur freedom, an' try ter cut our way through. It is the one way left, by hurley!"

"Then I am with you. A sortie it is."

"What d'ye say, Peter?" added the mountaineer.

"I'd as soon die there as anywhere."

"We're all agreed. Throw open the door, an' we'll try like the mischief ter pass their lines!"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE FIRST BREAK IN THE CHAIN.

THE plan was formed, and they lost no time in trying to execute it. Desperate as it looked, there was not a total lack of chances in their favor. It was neither probable that a large force was outside nor that the presence of Yank and Doctor Mark in the house was suspected, and a rush for freedom was just the thing for which the enemy would not look.

The barricade was quickly and almost noiselessly removed from the door, and then Doctor Mark turned back the key. Nevermiss flung open the door.

A breath of fresh air rushed in. The night was of medium darkness, and a view was obtained of the immediate vicinity. They saw men—more of them than had been expected—but not a solid body.

The rush was made at once.

Hartley and Peter, by direction, went first, and Yank followed with one arm around Peggy. Straight ahead they went, their faces toward the other men. A struggle must come, and they would not avoid it for a moment; the bolder their own movements, the better their chance of success.

Uncle Honest's men were only a few feet away, and the battle began at once. Who struck the first blow the survivors never could say afterward. They were only conscious that it began, and that, from the very first, it was a desperate struggle. The assailants had the momentary advantage at a surprise, but their adversaries quickly recovered and gave blow for blow.

They endeavored to beat down and capture the smaller party, while the latter tried resolutely to cut their way through.

To Doctor Mark it was like a scene from Bedlam, or something as bad. Having been a man of peace and of medicine he was now in new work, and he found it confusing. At the same

time he managed to see a good deal. He had armed himself with a club-like stick when in the kitchen, as a better weapon with which to force a passage than a revolver, and as he swung this stoutly, he saw Yank by his side fighting like a hero.

The mountaineer had left the best years of his life behind him, but his strength and activity seemed to have suffered no decrease. Few men, even in the Wild West, could hold their own against him, and his fame as a hard fighter was wide-spread.

Further from them, and fighting independently, was Peter Outerbridge. His work was desperate, headlong and remarkable, and those who felt the weight of his strong arms would never forget it—unless recollection was already stilled by death. Twice the Leather-Jacket might have forced his way through, but he seemed oblivious of the fact. It was no devotion to Peggy that kept him back, but he was under the ban of the ruling powers at last, himself, and he had but one idea—to fight to the last.

There was another factor in the case. Yank's grim, shaggy dog was in his element. He had fought all kinds of foes by his master's side, and that was his position now. More than one man felt the animal's remorseless jaws. Incumbered as Yank was, he might, perhaps, have failed to hold his own, but every time a hand was stretched out to grasp Peggy, Moses flew at the throat of the offender.

And no man passed the line Moses had elected himself to guard.

Yank Yellowbird's chief anxiety was in regard to reinforcements. Those then opposed to them did not constitute an overwhelming force, but if more came their last chance would be gone.

Suddenly the hostile party wavered, and the little band broke through and fled. They were not far from the friendly hills, and in obedience to a breathless command from Nevermiss they ran forward. Doctor Mark had taken Peggy's other arm, while Moses followed close after, but frequently looked back as though he would rather fight than run.

Yank had for the time forgotten Peter, but as he looked around he saw the young Leather-Jacket not far away. He was following, but not in a direct line with them. At first the mountaineer thought that he was staying back to guard the rear, but a closer scrutiny revealed the facts to Yank's experienced eyes.

He saw that Peter was moving heavily, unsteadily, and the cause was easily imagined.

"Young Outerbridge is wounded!" he muttered, uneasily.

The speaker abated his speed somewhat, but Doctor Mark spoke quickly.

"We can't put ourselves in jeopardy for him."

"He fought with us!" exclaimed Peggy. "We must not desert him now."

Her will was law, and as there was no sign of pursuit, they halted. Peter staggered toward them.

"Be ye hurt, mister?" Nevermiss asked.

"I've got a scratch or two," answered the Leather-Jacket, in a hoarse voice.

"Was it a blow?"

"'Twas a knife in my ribs."

"That so? I'm mortal sorry. Hyar, doctor, give him yer arm. We won't desert a comrade—"

"Let me alone!" muttered Peter, in a machine-like way. "The jig is up. I said we couldn't any of us escape, and we can't. It's sure death to oppose Eliakim Outerbridge, and I always knew it. You'd done better to take my advice, girl, and commit suicide, but it ain't too late yet. You shall not fall into their hands alive. I'll save you!"

Before any one suspected his intention he had presented a revolver to Peggy's head. It was loaded, and for a moment her life was in sore peril, but there was a quick head and a quick arm at hand. Yank struck up the revolver, and it was harmlessly discharged in the air.

"Land o' Goshen, man!" cried Yank, "would ye commit sech an atrocious murder?"

"I did it for her sake—"

The words were the last which ever passed Peter Outerbridge's lips. Half a dozen rifles suddenly rung out near the Graham cottage, and as many bullets whistled toward the fugitives. Peter started, clasped both hands to his breast, reeled and fell heavily to the ground. Not a word escaped him, and he did not stir after he fell.

Nevermiss knew what that fall meant, but he bent over the fallen man.

"Dead!" he uttered, simply, and not without feeling.

Loud voices were heard behind them.

"Come!" exclaimed Doctor Mark, hurriedly. "The pursuit is begun—it is madness to stay here!"

Yank sprung to his feet. He cast one glance toward the quarter of danger, and then clasped his arm around Peggy again. He had had a chance to regain his breath, and he now put forth every effort. His speed, as he ran toward the hills, was something remarkable. Peggy was almost lifted from her feet, and Doctor Mark found it all he could do to keep up, while

as to giving aid to the girl, at that pace, he could not.

The mountaineer was at his best. The affray brought back the days when he had fought the hostile Sioux, and if no woman had been with the party, nothing would have pleased him more than to turn at bay.

"Let the atrocious insex foller!" he muttered, looking back. "Ef they don't look out they'll get inter a condemn'd triberlation—they will, by hurley!"

They were following, but the valley was left behind by the fugitives. They ran into a gulch, and from that moment Nevermiss felt safe. In that place, with the friendly cover of night around them, they could well defy pursuit when Yank Yellowbird led. That the pursuit was to be kept up was certain. The pursuers were now at full speed, and they heard Isaac Outerbridge's voice urging them on.

One of the party had paused in the valley. The momentary panic of the enemy, and the failure to follow promptly, had arisen from the fact that Isaac and Uncle Honest had both been stricken down, momentarily stunned. The instant their minds cleared, the order was given to fire, and then the pursuit was made.

Uncle Honest forgot his age and actually kept with the rest, until the decree of fate made him almost stumble over the body of his youngest son. Bitter as he had been, that sight was too much for him. He dropped upon his knees, and when the now-aroused villagers came running forward, they found him kneeling by all that was left of Peter.

They spoke to him, but he did not answer. They did not know of the Leather-Jacket's fall from grace, and, seeing him there, imagined he had been slain by those who had escaped to the rocks. Eliakim Outerbridge had no such idea.

He knew how the young man had died; he knew that the volley of bullets had been fatal; and though he had sternly pronounced Peter's doom before, he was now like one dazed.

No greater harmony had ever existed among criminals than that among the Outerbridges before the fatal series of events begun which had led up to this; but one link in the chain had been violently snapped asunder. It was too late for remorse; Peter would never again hear his father's voice in anger or commendation.

The deluded villagers, strong in the faith that Uncle Honest was the noblest of men, spoke to him kindly. They tried to be consoling, forgetting, as people usually do, what a mockery platitudes are in an hour of affliction; but they touched no responsive chord until one of them chanced to observe that the old man still had Isaac and Aaron left.

The reminder acted like a spur upon Eliakim.

"Yes, yes," he said, eagerly, "Isaac and Aaron are left! True sons—true sons! Good boys, both! I brought them up; I trained them in the way they should go. My care was over them from the cradle. I named them; I gave them good old Scriptural names. Good boys! Fit sons of honest Eliakim Outerbridge."

The men looked at each other significantly; they imagined that their leader's mind was touched.

"Shall we carry him to the village, Uncle Honest?" asked one.

"Yes, yes; carry him there; carry him there. To my house, mind you—to my house. My doors are open to him, and I am an honest man. Peter was my son—a Scriptural name, gents, and a boy among a thousand, you know."

He paused abruptly. For a little while he had forgotten what had gone before, but recollection came back, and as the body was lifted, he pointed to the village and sternly added:

"Take him there!"

Some one offered the Peacemaker a friendly hand, but he rejected it and walked firmly after the dead.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

ISAAC LEADS THE PURSUIT.

PEGGY's defenders had a well-defined plan in mind as they retreated over the rough ground beyond the valley. If they had not found the Ormes during the recent search, they had learned a good deal about the hills, and among other things they found more than one recess, nature-made, where a good refuge could be found.

It was now their desire to gain one of these recesses.

Yank had selected a route he believed most favorable to them, and they hurried on the best they could; but the pursuit was sharp. Now and then they heard the voice of Isaac Outerbridge, and knew that while he led there would be no half-hearted measures used.

The ground at this point was rough and hard to pass, but not, as was the case with other places near Hornets' Nest, cut up with canyons, the steep walls of which would defy advance. They had only to meet a series of ridges, with depressions between, but it was a terrible rough road. Bushes, rocks, and fallen trees interfered with progress, and more than one stumble was the result.

"Bear up, little woman," said Yank, encour-

agingly. "Thar ain't an artom o' danger, though I admit that it will be best fur us ter run like hurley."

"Don't fear for me," Peggy breathlessly replied.

"You ain't in practice as you were years ago."

"That scene in the valley clings to me like a nightmare; it seems to paralyze my efforts. Peter Outerbridge was an evil man, but—"

"To be sure—to be sure; we understand. Such things will happen. Thar is an egregious sight o' triberlation afloat. My ancestor, Adam Yellowbird, and his wife, Eve, was troubled with snakes—the result o' over-eatin'—and I hev the malignant newrolgy like hurley. It's givin' me frequent twinges now, and it makes me jump lively, but I make it a pint ter jump the right way—straight ahead."

"Can't we deviate from our course and get rid of those scoundrels?" asked Doctor Mark, looking back at Isaac and his men.

"We'll try, arter a bit."

"This is severe upon Peggy."

"Don't think of me!" exclaimed the girl.

"Hear that?" quoth the mountaineer. "The little woman is pluck clear ter the tip o' her pooty foot, an' it comes nat'ral ter gals ter run away. My aunt, Prudence Hollyhock Yellowbird, run away ter get married. Her lover was a poick, an' her folks was o'posed ter him. Her father said 'twas a drunkard, gambler or pirate he'd keep mum, let the weddin' go on, an' then trust ter Parson Jimson ter reform him; but when it come ter a poick, the old gentleman had ter draw the line. He couldn't hev no sech depraved karakter in his fam'ly."

"Wal, my aunt had a mortal strong will o' her own, an' she sloped with the poetry-writer, Land o' Goshen! how her dad's Ebenezer did rise! He was the maddest man I ever seen. His language on the 'casion wa'n't so ch'ice as it might 'a' been, but the old chap felt the disgrace egregiously. No disreputable pusson had ever got inter his fam'ly afore."

"Bein' in this mood he roused up the neighbors, and they arms themselves with clubs an' guns an' started after the lovers. The poick was too poor ter hire a boss, an' he didn't find none ter steal; so they went on foot. They do say nigh onter a hundred mile was made that day. The poick was weak from turnin' off a pasture-poem in up'ard o' a thousand canters, an' he soon give out; but my aunt carried him over all the rough places an' held her own fur a good bit."

"But the pursuers finally got in gun-range, an' they fired a volley. 'Twas aimed at the poick, but my aunt fell, instead, an' all gathered round her, thinkin' 'twas a fatal tragedy; but the result was most s'prisin'—the bullet was found lodged in a poem the chap had gi'n her as a bridal present, an' she was only stunned. As nigh as they could make out she was as good as new."

"'Twas a mortal puzzle why the bullet stopped so short, fur all allowed the poem was too weak ter stop anything, but due res'arch showed that the lump o' lead had got tangled up in a long word. The old gentleman was so pleased over the narrow escape that he forgave the feller on condition he wouldn't write no more sech stuff, an' him an' my aunt was duly married. The feller made one o' the best farmers I ever knowed. He never tried ter write verses no more but once, and then Aunt Prudence ketched him at it, and thrashed him like hurley. That finished the argyment."

While the mountaineer had been talking so cheerfully he had let no chance escape. His strong arm gave aid to Peggy, and they passed over the rough ground as fast as possible.

But their chances did not improve. Isaac Outerbridge was urging on his men, and their knowledge of the way enabled them to gain, at times, by taking to gulches near at hand, the existence of which was unknown to the fugitives.

Nevermiss now saw with some apprehension that their hopes were growing less. They were not gaining, and Peggy was growing weary. Their utmost efforts did not suffice to take them beyond the view of the pursuers, except when the bushes briefly concealed them.

Such being the fact, the leader determined upon a new course of conduct. He explained it briefly. He had noticed that Isaac's men did not pause to search the thickets by the way, but trusted to luck that the smaller party had gone on. In this Yank saw hope, and he proposed that they secrete themselves in a thicket, let the enemy pass—if they would—and then get away as soon as possible.

The plan was tried.

Carefully selecting a covert, the trio paused and waited the result.

Yank and Doctor Mark had their weapons ready for use, but both were anxious to see all necessity for such a step avoided. If a fight occurred their chances would be far poorer than when in the valley.

They had not long to wait; on came the enemy at full speed, the tall figure of the Leather-Jacket at their front.

"I don't see 'em, sheriff," observed a man.

Not a word passed Isaac's lips. He was not

wasting his breath in idle talk, then. He ran past, leaping over rocks and logs, and the others floundered after.

No one had even looked at the thicket.

There were other bushes beyond, and as soon as these intervened, Yank arose.

"Now fur the grand effort," he announced.

"We want ter show that we're o' good pedigree, doctor, an' get out o' this on the jump."

They did their best. Knowing that Isaac would not long be deceived by their simple stratagem, they made all possible haste to get away. The mountaineer worked out a course at right angles with their former one, and away they went. This time there was nothing to urge them on but prudence, but that was sufficient incentive to action. For several hundred yards their speed was not slackened, but, as they entered a deep canyon, Nevermiss brought them to a walk.

"No need o' breakin' our necks any more," he announced. "The atrocious insex will do wal ter git us now, an' I reckon we kin get inter some cave all right an' safe. That's what we want ter do now, doctor; find some place whar we can leave this little woman, an' then look about fur the Ormes. It's mortal queer about them. Who give them a lift ter git out o' jail? Thar was a helpin' hand, but whose hand was it? Beats all creation, doctor, don't it? Wal, we'll look about fur them—you an' I, an' Moses—an' we'll find 'em ef it's in the books. Anyhow, we'll take keer Peggy don't git inter triberlation ag'in. The Outerbridges have had full swing hyar, an' they've cut up like the mischlef, but we won't 'low them ter molest Peggy any more—we won't, by hurley!"

Midnight was close at hand, and Eliakim Outerbridge and his surviving sons were collected in the former's private room. All were grave and thoughtful, and Isaac was sullen and morose. He had been obliged to return without any prisoners, and his temper was seriously upset.

"I have called you here, Isaac and Aaron," began Uncle Honest, in slow, measured speech, "to speak of our future. The Outerbridge family numbers one less than it did. Peter was disobedient, and he reaped what he sowed. All that is left of him is the still form in the kitchen. If he had been true to us he would now be alive and well. He was false, and you have seen the result. Let me ask of you if I have done well or ill?"

The Peacemaker was no longer dazed, and he showed no signs of sorrow. He was himself again, but was sterner, firmer than of old.

He looked keenly at his sons as he asked the question.

"You have done well," replied Isaac.

"Your course was just," coincided Aaron.

"I believed that you would say so; I felt sure that you, my boys, would not turn against your old father in any way. I have reared you all carefully, and given you every advantage I could."

"We appreciate it fully, and you'll find us as true as you could wish at all times," returned Aaron, quickly.

"That's a fact," added phlegmatic Isaac, more slowly.

"Good! Now, I want to tell you what is on my mind. Call it superstition or what you will, I am worried. Since Peter's death we number one less, and I can't get rid of an unpleasant suspicion that our power is threatened here. Other misfortunes may follow. We have been strangely unlucky in our recent efforts, and Yank Yellowbird and his fellow conspirators are at liberty. Also, there is the party that liberated the Ormes. The mystery about that case—the unknown identity of the rescuers—worries me. There may be more trouble ahead!"

"Let it come!" growled Isaac. "We can take care of the whole gang."

"Remember, father, that all Hornets' Nest is at our back, ready to respond when we call," supplemented Aaron.

"That is the surface view," Uncle Honest admitted, "and I may be wrong in feeling alarm, but it is well to provide for the future. As you know, the Denver bank holds nearly all the money we have raised here by means of confiscations, taxes and other means, but I have never cut loose from all cash. I will show you."

Taking a stout knife, he stooped and pried at what seemed to be a fixed board in the floor. A section arose, and a cavity was revealed beneath. He lifted a leather bag, and a jingle followed. He opened the bag, and the glitter of coined gold, of high denominations, was revealed.

"Five thousand dollars!" he added; "partly in gold and partly in paper money—bank-notes. This is my reserve fund, to be used in case of emergency. Nobody has known of it but me, but I now take you, my boys, into my confidence. If anything happens, we have this to use at once."

Not wishing to leave the money exposed to view, the speaker returned it to the cavity and replaced the board.

"This sum," he added, "is sacred to our use

in a time of necessity. Bear that in mind. Trouble may come, and possibly I can't get to it, but you know where it is. Do not take it out except it is sorely needed."

"I trust it will not be," Aaron answered.

"So do I, but we don't know. Now, my dear boys, my secret is yours, but I feel that I can trust you."

"Until death!" declared Aaron.

"Bet your life on it!" Isaac asserted.

"Good!" Uncle Honest added, with manifest satisfaction. "Of course our business will go on just the same. We shall miss Peter, but he was criminally disobedient. I know I can trust both of you. You owe everything to me. I started you in life with good, Scriptural names, and I have reared you up as noble men."

It was a ghastly parody on sincerity when the depraved old man addressed his blood-stained sons thus, but in his perverted mind was not a shadow of doubt of his own veracity. With a beaming face, he held out a hand to each of the Leather-Jackets, and they were warmly taken and clasped.

CHAPTER XXXV.

A NEW MOVE IN THE GAME.

THREE days passed. The history of that period, as far as Hornets' Nest was concerned, may soon be written. According to Uncle Honest's direction, Isaac and Aaron had rallied almost the entire male population and set them to work to find the Ormes, Peggy and the rest of the party that had incurred the wrath of the Outerbridges.

All through the surrounding hill-country went these searchers, but every night they came back unsuccessful. In brief, nothing but utter failure had resulted from the hunt thus far.

Cyrus Graham and his wife, and Knifebelt, remained in the City Hall prison. True to his threat, Uncle Honest had put up Graham's house at auction. It was bid off by a prosperous miner who could pay cash, and when the payment was received, it was "put in the treasury."

Little did the deluded citizens suspect what a mockery this ceremony was.

On the evening of the third day, darkness was gathering in a narrow canyon two miles from the village. The walls of the canyon were steep, but not unscalable. Care and patience would have found a way up, by means of certain fissures, if any one had wished to climb.

It was at this time, when the darkness made objects invisible except at the distance of a few feet, that a man appeared in one of these fissures a hundred feet above the bottom of the canyon. He had only come out to get fresh air, and he leaned upon his rifle and stood looking at the limited prospect before him in a thoughtful way.

This man was Doctor Mark Hartley.

He had been there perhaps ten minutes when a sound below, and to the right-hand side, arrested his attention.

"Yank is returning," he said, half-unconsciously speaking aloud.

"Is he?" asked a light voice behind him.

"Some one is certainly moving, Peggy," the doctor replied. "Or it may be a grizzly bear."

"Cheerful prospect!" brightly retorted the girl. "Of course you will hasten to embrace it—and the bear."

"I'll leave the embraces to other parties. But wait a little—the sounds draw near; some one is ascending the cliff. Our voices may not be safe."

They waited in silence, but Yank's fur cap soon appeared to view as he toiled up the rock.

"Hullo! be you thar, doctor?" genially asked the veteran. "Out fur exercise, I consait. I'm back, an' you'll soon see I ain't alone. Hope you're prepared fur comp'ny, with the house slicked up like satin, fur I'd hate ter lose my reputation fur good housekeepin'. I've brought a 'hull rigiment with me, but don't you be scared. I don't forget that our kitchen supplies are at low tide, an' I ain't going ter keep 'em hyar long; they'd eat us out o' house an' home. My gran'father, the Revolutionary relict, tells about a 'hull brigade that went a month 'thout eatin', but how they did it I don't see. Mobbe they lived on the tick-tacks o' war, but I prefer buff'ler-meat."

By this time Yank was by Mark's side, and other men were climbing after him. The doctor recognized the first as Storm Rider, but the others, as far as he could see, were strangers. The fact that Yank vouched for them was enough, however.

"Come right inter the parlor," pursued Nevermiss. "You may find things an' artom out o' plumb, fur we've only jest moved, an' the furniture we ordered ain't got hyar; but you kin set on the rocks, an' I consait it won't let ye down."

The speaker ushered his guests into the cave. The latter was a place large enough for a hundred occupants, and had proved a secure shelter to Yank, Mark and Peggy.

The doctor looked anxiously at the strangers. They were twelve in number, besides Storm Rider, who was not wholly a stranger; and with one exception they were muscular, sun-

burned, roughly-dressed men. The exception was a man who, unlike the others, wore fairly good clothes and had the air of a city man.

"Neighbors," continued Nevermiss, "this is Doctor Mark Hartley, a man who's egregious skillful at gunshot tribulations an' broken bones. Ef ye don't b'lieve it, one o' you kin throw a shoulder out o' j'int as a test, an' I'll bet suthin' he snaps it back in quicker'n burley. Doctor, these are men who've come ter purify the atmosphere o' these diggin's. Storm Rider found 'em, an' brought 'em hyar; an' when I come on ter them, we all j'ined hands. All but one is honest miners, an' he's an honest detective. I've knowed him fur years, an' his pedigree is good. Morse, come forr'ud an' show yer p'int!"

The detective advanced and shook hands with Hartley.

"We ought to know each other well with such an elaborate introduction," he observed, smiling. "I'm glad to meet you, doctor, and your professional skill may yet be needed. You see here a war-party."

He motioned to the bronzed men.

"I think I understand," Mark replied.

"No doubt. Hornets' Nest needs attention. Its remote location has heretofore been its protection, for there was practically no law here but that of the Outerbridges, but its fame has begun to go forth. Men have disappeared here never to be seen again, and in some cases pretty good proof is at hand. In brief, the misnamed 'Uncle Honest' has mercilessly doomed whoever did not kneel at their shrine, and his sons have carried out his commands. Their hands are red with innocent blood, and a more villainous gang does not exist!"

Morse spoke with warmth, but he moderated his manner as he added:

"I have been preparing a case here of late, but matters were brought to a crisis when Storm Rider and his balloon landed at Snakefoot Pass. He told a story which sent us here quickly. The gentlemen are worthy miners, who have agreed to help me, and we propose to seize the Outerbridges, silently and surely, during this very night, and take them away. The strong hold they have on the idiotic population, makes kidnapping preferable to open arrest—and safer."

"I only wish we had a rigiment o' artillery an' infancy, with my gran'father at the head!" declared Yank. "He'd clean the 'hull village out, an' give 'em a taste o' the tick-tacks o' war mortal painful ter behold."

"Storm Rider," said Mark, "have you any clew to the whereabouts of Vashti and Joseph Orme?"

"No; I only wish I had," the aeronaut replied, sadly. "I would give my right hand to know that they are safe."

"You must have a strong interest in them."

"I have."

"I heard them say that they could not imagine why you should have such interest."

"All will be told in due time. Wait until we have conquered the fiends of Hornets' Nest."

The speaker lifted his slouch hat and revealed his head almost covered with bandages.

"I am a series of wounds from head to foot," he added, in a hard voice, "and I owe all to Eliakim Outerbridge. Bah! why call him that? His name is David Marron. It was because I was foolish enough to let him know I recognized him that I got these wounds. He forced me to go to the hills, driving me with a revolver; then he fell upon and beat me senseless. When I recovered, I was actually in my grave; thinking he had killed me, as he intended, he had buried me in a cleft in the earth. Fortunately the covering was bushes, with a little sand, and I did not smother. I got out, crawled laboriously to my balloon, got away and only came down at Snakefoot. Had I not escaped thus, I should probably have died in the hills."

"No more evidence is needed ter convict the atrocious insex!" declared the mountaineer, "an' the sooner we are off, the better. We'll go right ter the vicinity o' the village, and then watch our chance ter descend on 'em as my Uncle Joshua did onter the Saracens an' Philistines in old time. 'Twon't do us no good ter order the sun ter stan' still, nobow, fur it's got out o' sight; but we want night more'n we do suns, comets or fire-bugs o' any sort."

They only paused long enough to have supper. This was not time lost, but they could get to the village before the citizens retired, even with this delay.

In due time the start was made. Peggy went with them, for no one was to return to the cave. Detective Morse and his party had horses secreted west of the village, and when the Gramams were rescued, and the Outerbridges captured, a prompt retreat was in order.

"This reminds me o' the time my brother, Mahaleleel, an' I went water-melon stealin'," observed Yank, as they walked along the canyon, after descending the cliff. "'Twas when I's a boy that we did it. We brought the melons home an' hid 'em in the hay-mow, but Mahaleleel, he 'lowed we'd prob'ly git found out, an' he suggested that ef we put one melon on the table, whar our parental ancestor could git some, he wouldn't thrash us half so bad."

"Wal, the old gentleman eat the melon, an' liked it, but Mahaleleel, he'd done wu'ss. He eat so much he got an egregious pain in his stummick, an' that started his conscience up as a spur will a hoss, an' he confessed the 'hull atrocious caper."

"Consid'rin' our father was a deacon in the church he showed his wrath like the mischief. He said, 'By mighty!' right out loud afore he thought, an' then he laid holt o' a stick. He couldn't lick Mahaleleel, 'cause he was sicker'n p'ison; so he give me a double dose, an' the way he laid on the rod was amazin'."

"Steal water-melons, will ye?" sez he, givin' me a powerful whack."

"I did once, but I've reformed," sez I, caperin' like a cat on a hot stove, an' blubberin' like hurley."

"Thou shalt not steal!" sez he.

"We give you part on't," sez I.

"Onrejuvenated youth!" sez he, whackin' me all the time, 'bow dare ye make me a pardner in yer iniquity?"

"You liked the fruit," sez I.

"It lays like lead on my stummick," sez he.

"Take an emetic an' throw it up," sez I.

"I'm a deacon," sez he, "an' I consait my stummick kin b'ar it; but yours is the stummick o' a sinner, an' I've got ter lick the melon out on ye."

"Say, dad," sez I, desp'rit with pain, 'thar is four more melons hid in the barn, an' I'll give you half ef you'll either drop this lickin', or give the rest on't to brother Mahaleleel."

"He stopped an' looked at me musin'ly."

"I s'pose my stummick could stan' it, bein' I'm a deacon, an' I guess you must be about purged o' evil now. It would be an egregious pity ter hev them melons sp'ile. Bring 'em in, Yank, an' we'll devour 'em afore any other boy finds 'em. He might not know they was stole, an' the poor feller would feel terrible ef he found it out, arterwards. Bring 'em in, Yank; bring 'em in! A deacon is strong enough morally ter run a good 'eal o' resk, at times!"

"I did bring 'em in, an' the way the old gentleman took 'em down was amazin'."

With conversation like this, Yank enlivened the journey and kept the others from thinking of what was to come. It was well that they should not think of it, for the arrival at Hornets' Nest was synonymous with the beginning of desperate scenes.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

ANOTHER BLOW FOR UNCLE HONEST.

WHEN the rescue-party came in sight of the village, the first among the early retirers were beginning to extinguish their lights, but the village still had a cheerful appearance. Only a few persons were abroad in the streets, however. The City Hall presented its usual appearance, but they could not tell the state of affairs there.

After a short discussion it was agreed that Yank and Morse, the detective, should go on and reconnoiter. They walked boldly forward, trusting to the darkness to shield them, for they were well aware that nothing could be more dangerous for them than a skulking policy. That would arouse suspicion at once, if any one chanced to observe them.

When they reached the City Hall, they found the building so curtained that no view of the interior could be gained; but Nevermiss remembered the opening where Storm Rider had once entered. They went there and found it undisturbed, and through that they passed to the storm room. The desired view was gained.

Three men only were in the court-room; they were Uncle Honest and two of his subordinates. Morse was about to propose that they begin work at once, and alone, as so small a force was at hand; but he had not time to explain his idea when the outer door opened, and they were treated to a strange, unexpected and startling sight.

Several persons abruptly entered.

First of all came Isaac, grim and stern, and Yank started as he saw Vashti and Joseph close behind him, prisoners. They were pale, and Joseph showed signs of having been in a struggle.

Uncle Honest started to his feet with great satisfaction expressed on his face.

"Captured!" he exclaimed. "Caught at last! Where did you get them, Isaac, my boy?"

"Where the thief hid them."

"Where was that?"

"In a cave in the hills."

"Good! good! I knew you could catch them at last. You're too shrewd for them, my boy! Aha! it takes a good man to fool the Outerbridges. Yes, yes!"

He rubbed his hands together with intense enjoyment, but Isaac answered, curtly and sharply:

"Wait a little. You may not be so well satisfied when you get the whole truth. You don't know yet who so mysteriously rescued and so effectually hid them."

The old man's face darkened.

"No; you're right," he agreed. "Who was the villain?"

Isaac turned to his men, who had stood in a compact body.

"Show the criminal!" he stolidly commanded.

The solid front broke away, and a single man was revealed, bound, bruised, and bloody.

It was Aaron Outerbridge!

It needed no magician to understand the truth. Not only did Aaron bear signs of a desperate struggle, but his pale, set, scowling face told a story of its own. Yet Eliakim could not believe. He had grown pale, and his hands were thrown up unconsciously, but after one long, silent, horrified look, he turned to Isaac.

"No, no; you don't mean it—you can't mean it. Tell me you are only jesting," he imploringly uttered.

"I tell you that the wretch who got the Ormes away and hid them—who turned traitor to us—stands there!"

Unmoved as a stone, Isaac pointed to his younger brother.

"He!" gasped Uncle Honest; "he did it!"

"I suspected him from the first," said Isaac, coldly. "I had seen his silly fancy for the Orme girl, and I drew my own conclusions. I watched, but until to-night I got no proof. Two hours ago I and some of my men secretly followed him to the hills; we traced him to his den; we entered the cave which we saw him enter, and there we found the whole lot. There was a fight, and the three men who had been acting as jailers to the Ormes were killed, but I took good care that their chief was captured alive. You see him there! No wonder we have been baffled until now, when the foe was in our own camp; but the Ormes are again our prisoners, and there stands the traitor who took them from us!"

Again he pointed to Aaron, and not the least pity was perceptible in his iron face.

Uncle Honest was trembling like a leaf.

"Aaron, too," he muttered, hoarsely; "Aaron, too! The second branch falls from the tree. Peter is dead, and Aaron is a traitor! And such a traitor! Oh! Peter was an angel of light compared to this wretch! Peter defied me, but he came to me like a man; he was truth itself. But this villain—this false son of mine—his heart was a pit of treachery. He was sly, and hid his lightest feeling; he acted the part of a traitor, and then talked loyally to me; he swore to be always true to me, but his heart was black with deceit. Oh, wretch, wretch!"

The old man's husky voice did not rise above its ordinary pitch, and there was more of pathos than anger in it. He was a villain; he was all that was evil; but one human feeling had been strong within him.

He had put love and pride in his sons, and now he was stricken in his only vulnerable part, and bitterly stricken, too.

Thus far Aaron had heard in silence. His gaze had wandered from his father to Isaac and back again, as each, in turn, became the speaker, and his face never changed, never lost its firmness and unwavering coolness; but there were some who saw that his once strong limbs shook as though all muscle was gone from them.

He broke his silence at last, and his voice was hoarse and rattling.

"I haven't any excuse to make; I have played my game and lost. I hired men to take the Ormes out of prison and keep them in the cave—it is all true. I did it because I had a liking for Vashti, and I knew you would never consent. Why should I come to you with vain talk? I've been my own man legally, as well as in fact, for years. Hadn't I a right to get my choice, if I could? I tried it and failed; that's all there is to it."

He paused and directed his gaze to Isaac's dark, stern, scowling face, and then added:

"I am truly grateful for the brotherly kindness I have received from the man who was my playmate in my childhood! I am grateful to the brother who was not willing I should have any happiness in life; who followed my footsteps like a dog; who spied upon me until my secret was learned; and then set his ruffians upon me like butchers upon a fettered ox. If I had my hands free I could point to the wounds he caused me to receive; as it is, I will let them speak for themselves. They are speaking to me in trumpet tones, and the note they sound is—*Death!*"

More and more Aaron wavered upon his feet as he spoke, but indomitable resolution carried him through. Scarcely had the last words passed his lips, however, before he tottered, took one blind step, and then fell with a crash to the floor.

Uncle Honest uttered a cry and made a forward movement, as though to go to the fallen man, but Isaac laid a restraining hand upon his arm.

"No!" he said, sternly; "menials are good enough to care for the traitor. He will soon recover, and I am proud of having given him the hurts which have drawn the bad blood from his body!"

There was no surgeon in the party, but none was needed there. Eph Hickman, the first man to bend over the fallen Leather-Jacket, quickly arose again.

"Aaron is dead!" he said, simply.

Eliakim Outerbridge started back, and would have fallen had it not been for Isaac's sustain-

ing arm. The last of the brothers remained unmoved.

"Take the body away," he said, coldly, addressing Hickman, "and let it be buried tomorrow beside Peter."

Then turning to those who had the Ormes in charge, he added:

"Put them in the cells!"

Uncle Honest was brushing his hands across his face in a strange way. He could not see distinctly, and had a vague idea that some sort of veil covered his eyes.

"Aaron, too! Aaron, too!" he muttered.

"Arouse!" directed Isaac, phlegmatically.

"Why do you mourn for a traitor?"

"True, true! He was false to me—false to his father!"

"And to me!" added Isaac.

"Yes, yes; he lied to me. He was worse than Peter. Peter was frank, and he never deceived me; he came to me like a man; but Aaron lied. He was double-faced; he was evil at heart."

"Think of him no more," Isaac impatiently answered.

"But he was my son; bad as he was, he was my son!" persisted the miserable old man.

"A pretty son he was! You do me wrong to speak of him in my presence. Did I ever deceive you? Did I ever have a selfish thought in connection with you? Did I ever fail to do my duty fully to you as a son and an officer?"

"Ah! no, no!" cried Eliakim; "my good son, Isaac! Always devoted—always true. You will not desert me, Isaac—say that you will not!"

"You talk folly, father, but I will say it if you wish. I will never desert you; never turn against you. I should be but a wretched apology for a son if I did. Rely upon me! Be calm, father; be calm. All is well; there is not a particle of trouble."

His powerful arm was around the old man's waist, and the aid was filial of aspect, but even then the son's face bore its old stolid expression.

"Yes, yes; all is well," Uncle Honest agreed. "Aaron and Peter were traitors, but you are still left. I know the good son at last. Isaac!—that is the name; a good old Scriptural name!"

It was plain that the speaker had received a severe shock, and Isaac hesitated for a moment. Then he turned to his men and said that he would take his father home, returning as soon as he had done so. Uncle Honest did not object, and they left the court-room with the strong arm of the one supporting the now-weakened body of the other, while Eliakim still muttered in his broken way.

The Outerbridge power was fast declining.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

ONE STEP NEARER THE END.

DETECTIVE MORSE laid his hand upon his companion's shoulder.

"I don't think we need to stay here any longer," he said, in a whisper.

"You're right," the mountaineer replied; "let's go back ter the rest o' our crowd, an' the sooner the better. We've seen sights o' interest in hyar, an' it shows plainer than ever the need o' prompt action. Come on!"

They retraced their steps through the dark area of the store-room, crawled out of the little opening, and then hurried from the village. Arriving at the place where they had left Doctor Mark and the rest of their party, they saw with momentary concern that more men were present than when they had gone away, but the explanation was highly satisfactory.

Reinforcements had arrived from Snakefoot Pass, and they now had a force which made their future look much brighter.

"Ef we work it right we've got the 'hull business right in our own hands!" declared Yank, confidently. "Jest let us git the pris'ners back, an' we needn't be afeerd ter knock elbows with all this egregious village. We won't run away, as we planned, but we'll stan' our ground like I've heerd my gran'father say he did at Bunker Hill—though now I think on't, I b'lieve he was surrounded by the inemy so he couldn't run."

No time was lost in moving forward. The Ormes were at the City Hall, and there was no knowing how long they would be allowed to remain there. Isaac, the last of the Leather-Jacket brothers, was a dangerous man. He was only safe when watched. The advance was quietly made, and without encounter. On arriving at the rear of the City Hall it was seen that some of Isaac's men, who did not seem to be needed for the night, were wandering away, and Morse suggested that the rescue party take possession of the store-room, and remain there until the most favorable moment for attack.

They would thus have the Ormes and Gramms under their eyes, and no tricks could be played upon them.

Isaac had returned, and he soon held a conversation with Hickman, within plain hearing of Morse and his men. Leather-Jacket stated that he was about worn out, and would treat himself to a luxury he had not had for some time—a full night's rest at home. The City

Hall and the prisoners he would leave in charge of Hickman, with eight men to aid him.

This arrangement was carried into effect, and Isaac went away.

The would-be rescuers consulted. Yank advised that Isaac and Uncle Honest be seized first of all, but Morse had a different plan. He detailed four men to watch the Outerbridge house, and see that no one left it, and decided to defer action there until early morning.

As to the City Hall, they would wait until the guards grew sleepy, and then pounce upon them. With the force now at his back Morse knew he could intimidate the whole village if, at sunrise, he had all the leaders, as well as the chief fighting men in his power.

Hickman and his companions rested in false security. Not a suspicion entered their minds that enemies were near the village, much less that they were massed in the City Hall, itself. The prisoners were equally ignorant. They sorrowfully submitted to their hard lot, without a gleam of hope to keep them up.

Circumstances delayed the attack longer than had been expected. The guards played cards until two o'clock, and it was an hour later when they became sufficiently sleepy to suit Morse.

Then he gave directions for the attack.

They wished to make it as swift and quiet as possible, and they moved accordingly. Some of the men crawled out at the rear and went around to enter at the front door. Positions were duly taken, and still the guards remained unsuspecting of the danger.

The signal was given, and the rescue-party entered the court-room on two sides at once.

Hickman was the first to see the danger. He started up with a warning cry, and his comrades sprang to their feet. They were too late for successful resistance; the assailants leaped upon them, and the guards were beaten down by the force of numbers. Not a shot was fired. They would have been glad to use their weapons, but no chance was given. In a very short time all were overpowered, and a supply of cords in the room was used to bind them.

The triumph was complete.

Storm Rider seized the first chance to go to the prisoners, and Yank and Doctor Mark kept him company. Slight as the sounds of strife had been all the captives had been aroused, and they were ready for the relief which came. Vashti and Peggy embraced, and there was a general shaking of hands.

"Joseph looks sort o' dazed," observed Never-miss, smiling, "but we'll try ter show him the hull egregious mess is goin' ter be straightened out."

"You never spoke truer," fervently replied Storm Rider. "Cheer up, Joseph; I have the best of news for you. When I was last at Snakefoot Pass I found a letter awaiting me, and its contents clears away every cloud. Horace Ashwood is dead, and his charge has been withdrawn!"

Joseph started back. At first he seemed unable to credit what he heard, but a look of joy flashed to his face suddenly. He turned to his sister.

"Vashti!" he exclaimed; "do you hear, Vashti?"

"All may as well know the facts now," added the aeronaut. "I give my word that your persecution is over, and you have friends here true and good enough to be in your confidence. Hear me, all who will!"

"Some months ago Joseph left his home in an Eastern State and started for Europe on business. A few days later came the story that the ocean steamer was lost with all on board. This was enough to arouse a fiendish plot in the mind of Horace Ashwood. He was a relative, and, as far as was known, heir to the Orme property which now seemed to be held only by Vashti.

"He laid his plans to have her declared insane. I need scarcely say the charge was utterly false; but you know what money will do in these days. Ashwood found villainous doctors, and others, and voluminous evidence was presented, which seemed to prove all that he alleged. At the crisis Joseph reappeared. His vessel had been wrecked, but he was among the saved. He began a fight for Vashti, but it was utterly hopeless—Horace Ashwood had the case well in hand, and an asylum stared her in the face.

"As a last resort Joseph took his sister and fled. Ashwood made a charge that Joseph had tried to murder him, and pursuit was made. The race was long and hot; it went on through many States and Territories. There was no peace for the Ormes; they were driven along as wolves drive their prey, and whenever their story was known, all who heard it turned against them.

"They were in this wood when I found them, took them in my balloon, and chance drove us here. I gained their confidence and they told me all; but bitter experience had warned them to trust no one else. At last, however, Horace Ashwood had died, and before his guilty life went out, he made a full confession of his crimes. There is now no fear for Vashti, or for Joseph."

The aeronaut ceased.

Congratulations were in order, and many

pressed forward to utter them. One person did not. This was Knifebelt. The boy was in a panic. To gain his liberty he had told Uncle Honest a long story which had no basis of fact. He had accused Joseph of being a forger, a bank-robber and murderer; but it was wholly a concoction of his own mind. He was now in a panic, for he feared that others might have heard his specious fiction.

"I think one more explanation is in order," observed Joseph, anon, addressing Storm Rider. "You have been strangely devoted to our interests, without cause visible to me, and you promised an explanation in due time. I think that time has arrived."

"You are right," the aeronaut replied; "it has come, and I will speak out. In few words, I am your mother's brother. My name is Hendricks. This announcement can convey but little to your minds, for only Joseph ever saw me in the past, and he was an infant at the time. I was a wild young man, though never criminal; and I deserted my home and friends long years ago. I wandered all over the world; was a dabbler in all things, and, too, worthless at all. I never knew—I confess it with shame—what had occurred at home until I met you, Joseph, and Vashti. When I learned that you were my nephew and niece I was stricken with remorse to think how I had neglected my own, and I made a silent vow not to divulge my identity until I had set you right with the world."

"There is one thing more," Storm Rider added. "If your parents were alive they might recognize 'Uncle Honest.' His name is not Outerbridge at all. He was named David Mar-ron, and remained so until his early manhood. He was a suitor for your mother's hand, Joseph, but was beaten in the race by your father. He then promptly left town. When your father inherited his property it was on condition that he changed his name from Maurice Rodrickton to Orme. He did so, and that is why Uncle Honest did not at first recognize you, when you appeared here, as the children of his successful rival."

"Wal, I don't see but all the kinks are straightened out now," observed Yank, genially. "All that remains ter be done is fur us ter descend on Eliakim an' his precious son. I hate that atrocious insex like the mischief. He didn't have no more feelin' fur Peter an' Aaron than he would hev fur a dog, an' I consait judgment ought ter fall on him, an' I will. The wicked only prosper fur a season. The Leather-Jackets was all red-handed wretches, but I'm down on Isaac the wu'st, by hurley!"

"We will soon have him," replied Morse, "and I think I have evidence enough to send him to the gallows."

"Don't speak too loud, Mister Detective. You'll observe that Peggy an' Vashti, an' Joseph an' the doctor, are havin' a four-sided confab. Jedgin' by their looks, their minds don't run on melancholy subjunks. Say, Morse, it wouldn't s'prise me an' artom ef they come ter some sort of an onderstandin'. Young folks beat all creation at makin' trades. A boy an' gal who don't know a hoe from a knittin'-needle will swap hearts like old stagers, an' they never ask money ter boot. Some on 'em find in the eend that they got egregiously cheated, though. Matrimony is a mortal bad complaint; I'd rather hev newrology the wu'st way, fur it seldom kills its victims, an' matrimony is invariably fatal!"

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE FINAL BLOW.

WHEN Isaac took Uncle Honest home, the latter lay down and at once fell asleep. It was not natural slumber, but a strange languor was upon both his body and mind. He slept, and was unconscious for hours.

When he awoke his mind was clear and recollection vivid. He remembered the scene at the City Hall, and how Aaron had died; and a tremor passed over his whole person.

The career of this wretched old man had been one of almost constant crime, and he had reared his sons in the same atmosphere, finding them apt pupils, but he was as much surprised and shocked to know of the treachery of Peter and Aaron as though they had been reared in an exemplary manner. With him, as with most parents, the old rule held good—the child that is all that is disagreeable and revolting to unprejudiced minds, is marvelously bright and good in the sight of the deluded beings to whom he owes his existence.

Uncle Honest suffered as he lay upon the couch, but he found comfort in the oft-repeated assertion:

"Isaac still lives!—Isaac is left! He will be true to me; he will never desert me. My brave boy, Isaac; my first-born. Isaac is left!"

Time and again the old man muttered thus, but he finally arose and lit the lamp. He saw that morning was not far distant. Looking out of the window, he saw a light burning at City Hall; all appeared quiet there. Eliakim no longer felt like sleeping, and he sat down and fell into thought. Aaron and Peter were in his

mind—try to banish them as he might, he could not forget them. He tried to think of them harshly, but since he had discovered Aaron's duplicity, the frankness of Peter appealed to him strongly.

A vague feeling of uneasiness—a premonition of more trouble to come—was upon him. Two of his sons were dead, and matters were in a very unsatisfactory state around Hornets' Nest. Would other blows fall?

"If the worst comes," he muttered, "there is the five thousand dollars under the floor. That will take Isaac and me to Denver, and leave a good bit over; and at Denver I have money in plenty."

Thoughts of the five thousand dollars in the bag made him anxious to look at it; to make sure it was still there; and he arose and pried up the loose board as he had done when Isaac and Aaron were there.

He looked down into the cavity, and then his face grew pallid and his eyes assumed a wild, startled appearance.

The bag of money was gone!

Uncle Honest gasped for breath, and perspiration started out on his forehead. Gone! And only he and Isaac had known of the hidden treasure! Suddenly he caught sight of a small, folded paper—the only thing now in the cavity—and he caught it up and unfolded it. There was writing on one side, and he hurriedly read as follows:

"HONORED FATHER:—I have discovered that there are strange men in and about Hornets' Nest, and I do not fail to read the signs of the times. Our reign is over. The ill luck of the last few days is growing ominous. I infer that our enemies have rallied a large force to their aid. Rats will desert a sinking ship, 'tis said, and I am going to look out for myself while I can. I have taken the five thousand dollars kept here by you. This shall be my share of the estate. If you are not captured before you find this, I advise you to skip out and go to safer quarters. Capture means something unpleasant. It is probable that you will never see me again. By morning I shall be many miles away. I wish you good luck.

ISAAC OUTERBRIDGE."

The paper fell from Uncle Honest's hands, and his face was ghastly.

"Robbed!" he gasped, almost mad with dismay and terror. "Robbed, and by Isaac!"

The blow was a staggering one, and its full force was imprinted upon his mind. What had gone before had been nothing compared to that. The last of his sons has robbed him; had deserted him when peril was abroad; and had announced his work in a note every line of which was cold and heartless in the extreme.

An enemy might have pitied the fallen man then.

"Oh! Peter, Peter!" he cried, shrilly, "why was I so mad? Aaron lied to me and deceived me; and Isaac has robbed me; and you were the only one who had a spark of manhood. You came to me frankly, with truth on your lips, and you were murdered by my orders! Oh! my boy, my murdered boy! Why couldn't I pick the grain from the chaff? Why was I so mad?"

He swayed weakly to and fro, putting out his hands blindly.

"Isaac, too! Isaac, too!" he moaned; and with these words upon his lips he fell forward unconscious.

There was another lapse of time, and then consciousness returned to the downfallen "Peacemaker." Daylight was in the room. Uncle Honest lay upon the couch, and the murmur of voices was audible near him. He listened mechanically, his eyes still closed.

"Yes," said a voice, which, really, was that of Morse, the detective, "it is all over with Isaac Outerbridge. It seems that he tried to carry out the plan mentioned in the letter. He tied the money-bag to his belt, and managed to sneak past our guards. Then he went to the horses and selected the fastest—a vicious young brute, full of life and hard to manage. When Isaac saddled him he did not buckle the girth tightly enough. Probably the saddle turned as he mounted; at any rate, the horse ran away, and as Isaac had been thrown, and his foot was caught fast in the stirrup, he was dragged along the ground as the horse galloped madly away. We found the horse half an hour ago, with the man still entangled in the stirrup. Isaac was quite dead, and so perished the last of the Leather-Jackets!"

"Isaac, too! Isaac, too!"

The words broke hoarsely from Uncle Honest's lips. He tried to rise, but was as weak as a child. He fell back helplessly.

"All gone!" he added, faintly. "Isaac was the last, and he robbed me! Now am I sorely stricken. Oh, Peter, Peter! why did I turn against you? All the others were false, but you—told—the—truth!"

Doctor Mark's finger touched the old man's wrist, but Eliakim knew it not.

"The end is near!" Hartley gravely observed.

"Yes," muttered Uncle Honest, shaking as though with ague: "they are my three boys—Isaac, Aaron and Peter; good old Scriptural names. They are the Leather-Jackets, and I am the Peacemaker of—"

The faint voice died away; one more shiver

passed over his form, and then he lay quite still.

Uncle Honest was only a memory.

There was no further fighting at Hornets' Nest. Bitter, indeed, were the people for a while, and Mrs. Charity Potter made herself spokeswoman; but when the town treasury was looked to, the loudest talker there was dumb. It did not take long to show how the people had been robbed during the Leather-Jacket monopoly.

Uncle Honest was buried by Peter's side, but the treachery of Aaron and Isaac was not forgotten. Their graves were made in a remote canyon.

As Cyrus Graham was to leave town with the rescue-party, he demanded the money received for his "confiscated" property. He obtained it, and then the last dollar was gone from the treasury.

The boy, Knifebelt, wisely ran away. He feared arrest for pushing Joseph from the balloon. He and the Ormes had been going in company, but the boy tried to steal it and go alone. As it started, Joseph managed to gain a hold, but Knifebelt flung him out. This was on the occasion when Doctor Mark first saw the Ormes.

When Morse's party left the village they were accompanied by Doctor Mark, Yank, the Gramams, Joseph, Vashti, Peggy and Storm Rider.

Several prisoners were taken along, but with them we need feel no interest.

"Good-by, Hornets' Nest!" quoth Yank, looking back. "I consait none on us ever want ter see your egregious shanties ag'in, though thar's no great loss without some gain. The doctor loses his patients here, but I notice he's mortal attentive ter Vashti; while ef Peggy's smiles don't cure Joseph, I'm atrociously mistook. The Yellowbirds are modest, an' I don't want ter set up as a prophet, but I shouldn't be an artom s'prised ef su'thin' happened!"

Something did happen, inside of a year. Joseph and Peggy were married, and settled in the East with "Storm Rider," no longer a wanderer, near them; and when Hartley settled in a brisk Colorado town he convinced Vashti that he, as a doctor, needed a wife. He found one, and Vashti is a living proof.

The Ormes found no trouble in settling their affairs at their old home, and regaining their property.

Cyrus Graham and his wife are in the same town where Peggy lives. They love her like an own daughter, and find happiness in seeing that she is perfectly happy.

Knifebelt's whereabouts are unknown.

"Gunnison Alf" and "Firefly Nell" were found never to have existed.

Detective Morse succeeded in convicting his prisoners, and he received due credit.

Some months after the events of this story, Yank Yellowbird, who continued his roving life, was passing near Hornets' Nest, accompanied by his dog. He turned out of his course to again view the place, but he was not prepared for the exact state of affairs.

Hornets' Nest was a ruin. It had been swept by a fire, and not a building had escaped total, or partial, destruction. He passed through the blackened remains, but found no living thing there. Judgment had come to the deluded inhabitants, and the town was swept from existence.

Moses was whining uneasily, and his master was glad to leave the valley for the purer air of the hills. There was the abode of Nature which the mountaineer liked so well.

THE END.

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